

OCTOBER, 1924

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"ORCHIDS TO ONIONS"

Complete novelette by
VIOLET GORDON



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Etc., Etc.

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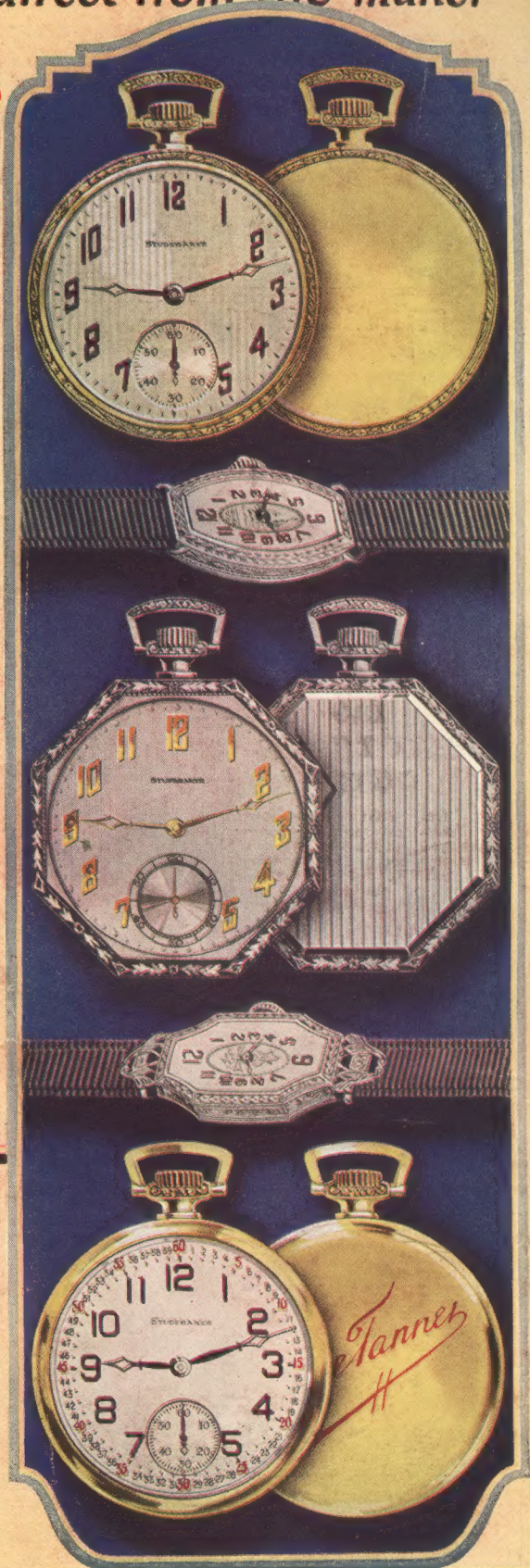
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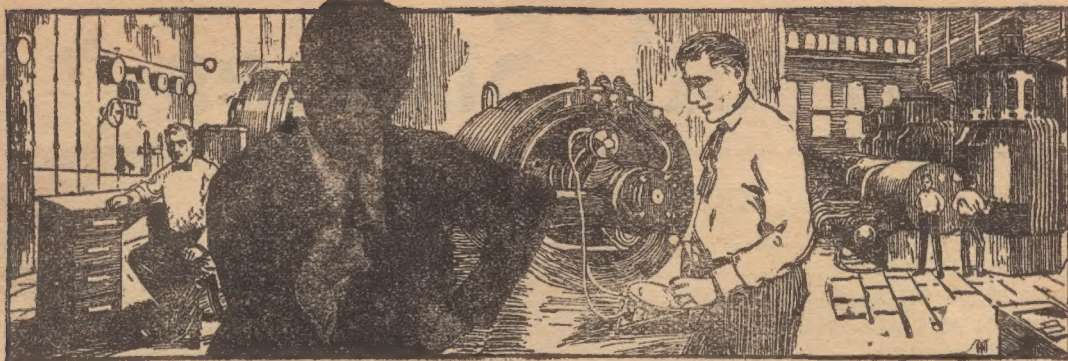
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October

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FLY-BY-NIGHTIE

OF course, one is apt to get a little reckless after three separate attempts to elope—What? No, different lovers, of course—have been frustrated by an unreasonable father,—especially if one is all of eighteen, very lovely, very redheaded and very “passionate.”

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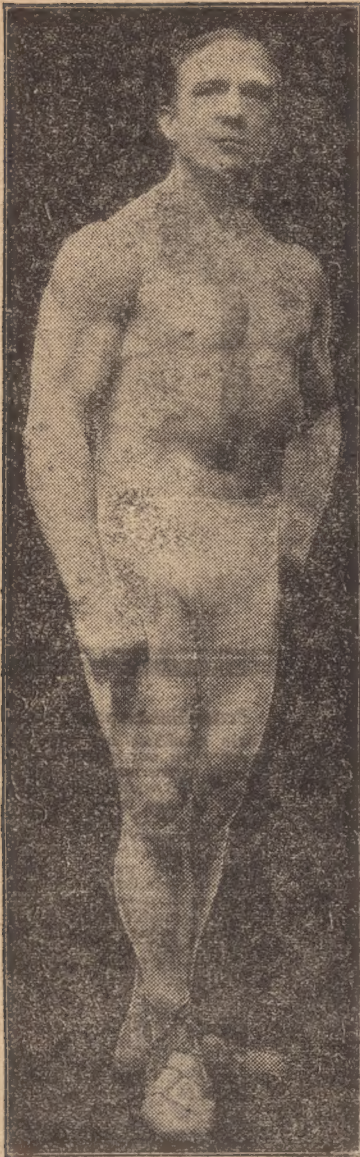
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ORCHIDS TO ONIONS

By Violet Gordon

MRS. CRANSTON liked to make epigrams—if any one would listen. For example, she once observed that the way of a man with a maid is guileless as an infant's stare, compared with the way of a maid with her mistress's husband. And to this pungent utterance her daughter listened. Indeed, Vera listened so attentively that when she married Hooper Kent and left New York to live in Camden her position against the predatory maid was already well-fortified. She engaged only such persons as caused Hooper neuralgia of the eyes if, by any misfortune, his glance rested on the domestic personnel.

This continued for four years, four years of small-town life, mainly satisfactory to Hooper, whose automobile factory—he was now a junior partner—lay a convenient mile down the Hudson; but rather deadly for Vera. Not because she did not love her husband. Oh, no! Hadn't she all but thrown Scranty Davis over for him—Scranty, whom the other girls were wild about? No, again. It was just because Vera hated small towns. Year by year she piled up the straws of her dissatisfaction till Hooper's resistance wore away, and he agreed to move to New York.

"You'll love commuting," said Vera enthusiastically. "All men do. You can run out by train or in the new car."

"Quite a riot," Hooper admitted. "And it will cut out only about three hours of each working day. Of course, if I go by train I can read and improve my mind; or I might try writing a scenario."

His sarcasm was interrupted by a sorry-faced damsel who came to announce dinner. But, in any case, Vera was already thinking of more important matters. There was her mother on Park Avenue, and there were all the girls. It would be heaps of fun to live in New York again!

It so happened that of the three servants on Vera's staff only Mary, the cook, was willing to leave Camden. Consequently, when Vera arrived at her newly-rented house on Gramercy Park with her small son and her furniture, she was obliged to go in search of a housemaid and a nurse.

During this unfruitful quest she thought frequently of her mother's epigram. It seemed to her active imagination that the female unemployed of the metropolis were case-hardened in pulchritude. She concluded that, for some unknown reason, there had been a general exodus from the stage-door to the kitchen. How could any woman bring herself to let one of these sirens loose in a peaceful domestic establishment? And yet—what was one to do?

In this vacillating frame of mind she was caught in a trap. Hooper telephoned one afternoon that he had a prospect of landing the biggest order of the year. Old Claybourne, of Montana, who had always bought from Holferne's in the past, had made him a tentative visit. The deal was not closed; but Hooper had asked Claybourne to dine with them in town that night.

A wail vibrated the wires between New York and Camden. Vera was tragic. "Yes, but we have no——"

"Never mind the bananas!" Hooper was impatient. "Tell Mary to shake a wicked chicken bone—that's all the old precious will care about. I'll pass the plates if Mary won't."

But, of course, no right-minded wife could agree with this heresy. Vera must have a maid to serve the dinner, whatever happened. She telephoned frantically to a registry, and an hour later made the acquaintance of—Adele.

Now on this day it chanced to be raining. It also chanced that, since birth, Adele's hair had reacted unfavorably to rain. Therefore, when Vera first saw her she was not unduly alarmed. True, Adele was youthful—there was something spring-like about her. But at least she did not suggest the final kick of a jazz chorus. In fact, her face was utterly innocent of make-up. Vera, in her extremity, engaged her.

"Where was your last place?" she asked, naturally enough.

"I have never worked out," the girl confessed. "But I did the housework at home."

This was not encouraging. However, Vera showed Adele her sleeping quarters, a small room on the fourth floor.

"You won't mind being up here alone?" she questioned. "Cook has a room in the basement."

No, Adele was not at all nervous. She left her suitcase upstairs and came down for her first lesson in waiting on table.

Fortunately, the baby was visiting his grandmother. Much as she loved her three-year-old son, Vera was glad that in the confusion she did not have to put him to bed. After the lesson she dressed in careful haste, and nodded with business-like approval at her own reflection. Clinging black, sleeveless—careless girdle caught with a scarlet hibiscus flower—long, jet earrings. Vera's lips relaxed into a smile not quite so business-like.

"Really, I'm rather nice," she agreed with her mirror.

A minute later she swept in upon Adele, whose eyes were instantly lifted in flattering appraisal.

"Haven't you dressed yet?" Vera exclaimed. "You'll have to hurry. You'll find a cap and apron in the linen closet off your room. You don't object to wearing a cap, do you?"

Adele did not, and Vera relaxed comfortably. So few maids would wear caps now. In ten years, they would be obsolete. She fussed about the table, rearranging the flowers, until the doorbell rang. Obviously Adele could not answer it. Greatly annoyed, Vera was forced to do so herself.

Hooper stood outside with the great Claybourne—a heavily-bearded westerner with an aggressive stomach. The latter followed himself into the house, treading softly in the manner of his kind, and Vera sparkled hospitably up at him.

For fifteen minutes she drew her guest out on the subject of Montana while, all the time, she experienced the feeling that in spite of his hearty tones there was something cautious, something cagey, about the man.

"I don't believe he intends to give Hooper the order," she speculated. "I'm sure he didn't want to come to dinner."

The clock chimed the half-hour, and simultaneously a sweet voice spoke from the dining-room portières, according to instructions: "Dinner is served, madam."

Claybourne was seated with his back to the door, showing his hostess some picture postcards of his Montana garages. Hooper faced the door; Vera, happening to glance up at this minute, saw her husband staring with singular intentness across her shoulder. Instinctively she turned, and by a worthy effort refrained from gasping.

Adele stood by the curtains, her pale hair curled till it stood out like an aureole round her head, her shoulders—pink-white as the petals of apple blossoms—gleaming above an evening frock of amber and rose, her feet encased in yel-

low slippers. Adele was as beautiful as Aurora draped in morning clouds. Nor with it all had she forgotten the cap and apron. They looked on her as a horse's collar and blinkers might appear on a gazelle. Vera glided forward and pushed the vision quickly into the dining-room.

"What on earth——" she began, but stopped short. Mr. Claybourne and Hooper were following. In far less time than it would take to murder and conceal the fair body of Adele, or even to hustle her into the pantry, they would be in the room. Vera acted on a desperate impulse. She snatched Adele's cap from her head, pulled hard at her apron string, and concealed the two articles behind her own back, just as the men joined them.

"Oh—Mr. Claybourne," said Vera, in a high, unnatural voice, "I want to introduce you to—Miss Benson."

The garageman executed a dancing step. He advanced upon the amber and rose creation with almost foolish delight. He bowed as low before her as his anatomy would permit—and straightway became another man.

Miss Benson sat at the table as a fellow-guest of the westerner's. She rose from it only to assist her mistress to remove one course and bring on another—for Vera played her part like a stoic. The dinner was a great success.

At ten o'clock the principal guest, inwardly deploring his married state, left to catch his train for the West. Hooper, in rare humor, accompanied him to make final arrangements for the delivery of the biggest order of the year. Adele, who had had a charming evening, went to bed. And Vera fainted quietly on the davenport—at least, she thought she was going to, but she didn't quite lose consciousness.

For one thing, she heard the doorbell ring repeatedly. And at last she heard fat Mary mount with much puffing from the basement and admit some one.

"Merciful minnows!" A startled voice recalled her. "What's the matter? Are you ill?"

Vera raised a lovely, haggard face from her pillow. A spark of interest lighted her dull eyes. "Scranty," she murmured weakly. "Yes, I'm ill."

Scranty was alarmed. He was also helpful. He foraged about till he found some wine, a glass of which he brought to Vera; he rearranged the cushions under her head; and then he fell to massaging her hands, tenderly and ever more tenderly. In fact, the extreme tenderness of his touch revived her as nothing else had. With a slight blush she sat up and tidied her skirts.

"How did you happen in?" she asked.

Scranty looked hurt. "What do you mean by living in New York without notifying me? If it weren't that I have an apartment across the park, and happened just now to run into Hooper a-rushin' off with a Russian grand duke——"

Vera smiled faintly. "You're wrong. They grow that alfalfa in our own west. So you met Hooper and he sent you in to me—he knew I needed a kind word. But why were you coming home at ten o'clock?"

"I promised my mother I always would," said Scranty virtuously. "And now tell me why you needed a kind word, and why you were so prostrated when I found you?"

Vera, her face hardening as she proceeded, poured forth the whole awful tale. "Imagine!" she concluded. "Pink and amber, with lavender facings!"

"Like a rainbow," he suggested.

"Yes—a home-made rainbow."

Scranty brightened. "Don't you mean a house-maid rainbow?"

"Vile," said Vera; then returned to her grievance. "And over it all, a cap and apron!"

Before he could stop himself her visitor broke into a grin. "What an illustration for a song!"

"You always were an idiot," Vera told him irritably.

"I was over you, at any rate," he retorted—and, of course, she was mollified. "And speaking of that, I never could understand why you threw me over for Hooper."

"But I didn't throw you over. We were never the least bit engaged."

"Whose fault was that?" he demanded; then gloomily: "And to think I introduced the fellow to you!"

"It was lovely of you," Vera assured him. "Hooper is the only man I could ever love."

Which was quite unnecessary of her. Scranty, who was not without charm in most feminine eyes, looked justly grieved.

"That's utter nonsense," he declared. "Any normal woman can learn to love any man who is neither a dud nor a baboon provided she——" He hesitated.

"Well—provided she what?"

"Is made love to by him," he finished.

Vera was amused. "It's you who are talking nonsense, Scranty. Since you have mentioned our case—doesn't that prove it?"

He shook his head. "You don't get me. I proposed to you twelve or thirteen times, I believe. But I never *made love* to you. That's where I was a fool."

The people who blush easily are generally sensitive about it. Vera's tone was scornful. "I suppose you're thinking of petting parties!"

"Well—not exactly. The modern petting party is a bit infantile, or else a matter of doing the expected thing. I simply mean that even now—speaking academically, of course—if through some unforeseen accident a decent sort of fellow should make honest-to-God love to you for fifteen or even ten minutes, you would afterwards think of me—I mean, him—with a certain softening——"

"Of the brain," she interrupted acidly.

"You're very rude," he told her. "But I forgive you because I have a lovely nature. Besides, I know I'm right. I'll

bet you I could prove it—dollars to doughnuts."

Vera looked pained. "Let's be original at all costs," she implored.

"Very well, then. Orchids to onions, if you prefer it."

"By all means." Her lips were delicately curled. "I don't think your idea in the least preposterous; and, of course, I'll take you up. We'll ask Hooper to hold the stakes."

But she didn't, even though at that moment Hooper, in the manner of angels and husbands, made a timely entrance. As a matter of fact, she was far too startled to mention the subject. Paradoxically, with his name on her lips she had quite forgotten Hooper. She had even forgotten Adele.

But Hooper had not. "Where, by all that's opportune, did you get that baby houri?" he inquired.

Vera stiffened. With the fewest possible words she explained, adding: "Of course, I shall send her away in the morning."

Her husband, looking judicious, lit a cigarette. "If, as you say, the girl has never been away from home, she probably thought you meant her to dress as you were, in evening things. All these girls have party rags."

"That's all very well. But even if she has never been in service, she must have read the usual trash—she'd learn from it how maids are supposed to dress. No, Hooper, she's just what you'd call *dumb*."

"But beautiful," he qualified with a wink at Scranty. "Anyway, honey, I'd give her another chance. We owe it to her; she handed me the Claybourne order. See here, you could have a nice quiet talk with her, explain matters. She won't make that mistake again. Besides," he added, "it will be a novelty having a decent-looking girl to open the door. I'm a trifle fed up with hatchet-faced females."

With a supreme effort Vera controlled

herself. "I don't see what difference it makes *who* opens the door, so long as she's neat and clean."

"Well, I do," Hooper returned. "And I notice that you're particular enough when it comes to chauffeurs. Who engaged Victor? You said a man like that added a fortune to the value of a car."

It was true. Vera knew she was in a tight corner. Mentally grinding her teeth, she shrugged the conversation into other channels. Scranty made this easy.

And Adele remained, a thorn in Vera's side. On the whole, Hooper was fairly discreet. But it is hard for a man to acquire the proper touch of condescension toward a pretty housemaid with whom he has dined on terms of equality. It wasn't that he said or did anything outrageous. But there was a quality in his good-morning smile. Also, it seemed that, day by day, in a maddening way, Adele got prettier and prettier.

On the other hand, despite her initial dumbness, she was rather surprising. She learned quickly, and within a month was fast becoming what the housekeeper defines as a treasure. She even extended her duties to the care of the youthful Georgie, whose unlovely nurses came and went so spasmodically that half the time he was without one. Yes, in the beautiful Adele, Vera found compensations.

She also found them in her old friends. Most of the girls Vera had known before she moved to Camden had married. They were now rather frivolous young matrons who swept their one-time companion into a dizzy whirl of teas, matinées, Mah Jongg and bridge parties—all very stimulating after the provincial life in Camden.

Then too—and this must not be discounted—there was Scranty.

What is more natural than for an unattached man to drop in for the evening at the house of his oldest friend? And if the oldest friend happens to be anchored to a sheaf of dull-looking estimates—Hooper was forever trying to

catch up with the time he lost in commuting—why shouldn't the unattached man devote himself to the neglected wife? Historically speaking, it has often been done. Vera found Scranty's visits increasingly welcome. Quite often he took her to informal parties, and even to a play—all with Hooper's hearty approval.

And yet, Scranty was not perfectly satisfied. In Vera married, as in Vera single, he found he had run into a snag—if one can compare a charming woman with anything so unattractive.

Americans are Puritans at heart, in spite of the modern pose," he complained one night.

They were sitting by the fire, and Vera was knitting a sweater of some soft pastel shade. She was a little tired, and there were faint shadows beneath her eyes. They made her look weak and feminine. There were also shadows in the olive-green and silver of her loose tea-gown. The fire cast flickering shadows, and so did the mulberry-draped lamp. Everywhere were shadows, and subtleties.

"I don't see how you can say that," she objected. "I haven't noticed anything puritanical in New York."

Scranty threw his cigarette into the fire. "What about yourself, old dear?"

"Me—I?" with upraised glance.

"Yourself. Your feet are tangled in a net of inhibitions. You can't deny it."

"Why"—faintly indignant—"you must be insane." She counted fourteen purls. "What do you want me to do? Get drunk?"

"Well—that might do you good. But it isn't exactly what I mean. Do you know, every time I touch your arm you draw away as though I were sprouting horns."

There was a shade of uneasiness in Vera's laugh. "You're so terrifically dangerous, Scranty."

"Naturally—and then some. But why can't you—" He ran out of words.

"Be a bit more continental?" she suggested. "Probably I should, if I had the inclination."

Scranty was not pleased. "You can't miss champagne if you've never tasted anything but orangeade——" he began, but Vera interrupted.

"Are you comparing Hooper to orangeade and yourself to champagne?" she wondered, forgetting to be subtle.

"Yes," brazenly from Scranty, "considering that you've been married to Hooper for four years."

"I find him just as attractive as the day I married him," she retorted.

Scranty leaned forward, his eyes compelling hers. "So you *think*. And yet, if I had you in my arms for ten minutes——"

"Which brings us back to the orchids and onions," Vera cut in. "I believe you said that if any man who was not a dud or a baboon——"

"Yes. That's my conviction. You are a grown woman. Why should you have your facts sugar-coated?"

Vera had an uncomfortable suspicion that she was losing her dignity. Not that dignity counted for much these days. But, at any rate, she knew she was juggling thunderbolts. She was dismayed because her breath seemed a little short.

"You are a very Mephistophelian person, Scranty," she said lightly. "I wish you'd ring the bell. I'll get Mary to bring us something on a tray, and we'll have Hooper in."

Scranty was not as discouraged as one might suppose. He believed he knew women. He sauntered over to the door and the next minute gave a startled exclamation:

"Georgie—you young Turk!"

Vera hastily joined him. There in the hall, pattering across it in fat, bare feet, was the pyjama-clad figure of her son. Georgie dimpled at his mother, very wide-awake.

"What are you doing here?" Vera de-

manded, snatching him up in her arms. "Naughty boy—why did you get out of bed?"

"I'se waiting for Daddy to chum upstairs—n' he hasn't chummed yet."

"But, darling, Daddy doesn't go up till ever so late. And he never visits you."

Georgie wriggled his toes. "No," he admitted. "But he chums up evy night, 'n' to-night I wants to fyighten him. I'se going to call out 'Boo'."

Vera smiled indulgently. "He's been dreaming," she explained to Scranty. "He hasn't a nurse just at present, and mother thinks I'm a heathen because I let him sleep alone in his nursery on the third floor. But Hooper and I are directly below, and Adele is on the top floor."

"Ess," said Georgie complacently. "Del's on top flo'—n' Daddy goes up top flo' evy night."

A silence fell on Vera and her visitor, a silence so chilled that it froze the smiles grotesquely on their faces. Scranty found himself staring fascinated at the soft pink lips of Vera's baby.

"N' I wants a dink," the cherub concluded.

Vera extended a hand cold as virtue. "Good night, Scranty," she said briefly.

"G-good night," he stammered, and grinned foolishly at Georgie, whose round, comedian eyes gazed back at him over his mother's shoulder till the two figures disappeared at a curve of the stairs. A minute later Scranty found himself on the street.

"Curried centipedes!" he muttered softly. "And deviled scorpions!"

The next day, just after luncheon, he telephoned. For it has been argued that neither sex has anything on the other in the matter of curiosity. Besides, Scranty had his own interests to protect. And Scranty was deeply interested.

Vera's voice came to him, weary, apathetic. He thought of autumn leaves soaked with rain.

"May I run over to see you?" he asked.

There was a pause. "I'm going out—to mother's," said Vera. "And, anyway, I—I have a headache."

"That's a damn shame." Scranty was comfortingly downright. "I'll not stay more than half an hour. I have a reason for wanting to see you."

Another pause. "Very well, then."

Adele admitted him, demure and spring-like. In passing he gave her a man's appraising glance. It was rather funny about old Hooper . . . and with a wife like Vera! Still, there was something in that bromide about an ill wind.

Vera, dressed for the street, was looking—well, he had other fancies. Lonely beaches and morgues. He held her hands in a close, brotherly clasp.

"Let me help," he begged. "Of course, I heard what Georgie said. I couldn't stay away."

And Vera capitulated. He felt the nervous pressure of her fingers, saw the tempest in her eyes—long hazel eyes with lashes like curved scimiters, eyes that had tormented him for seven years.

"It is true," she whispered. "Last night—I saw him—myself."

Scranty led her to the sofa and sat down beside her.

"Tell me about it."

There was not much to tell. Vera had put Georgie to sleep and had then waited in the nursery. At about twelve o'clock she had heard a step on the stairs. A minute later, Hooper— Here she crushed her handkerchief to her lips.

"But," Scranty remonstrated with a fine show of generosity, "there are other rooms on the fourth floor, aren't there? He might have been going to—er—fasten a window or something."

Vera smiled—a bitter, unbelieving smile.

"Still," he persisted, "you must give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Oh, yes! That's what a man would say. Mother won't, when I tell her."

"But, honestly, I'm with you on this. I have an idea—"

"Yes?"

Scranty hesitated. "There's one way you could find out."

Her eyes darkened. "How?"

"Why—send Adele with Georgie to spend the night at Mrs. Cranston's. Get Hooper to meet you in town for dinner—so that he won't suspect anything. Then—take Adele's place to-night."

For a long minute Vera digested this. "It—seems so melodramatic," she objected at last.

Scranty shrugged. "I'm just giving you an idea." He watched her with close calculation and a certain veiled excitement for another minute. Then: "Take my advice, old dear, and don't see Mrs. Cranston—just telephone her. Arrange about Georgie, but don't give any particulars at present."

"I'm—afraid to telephone. If I speak from upstairs Adele might overhear on the hall connection. I'll want her to think it's an invitation or she would suspect."

"That's all right. I'll keep watch down here while you are upstairs. And another thing—if events turn out as you expect you must—er—impersonate Adele through the entire—interview. The room will be dark, of course. Then to-morrow let me come and talk it over, before you speak to Hooper."

It took Scranty nearly fifteen minutes to convince Vera that there was wisdom in this course. But he was a born persuader. She agreed finally to let him do her thinking for her.

"I'll telephone now," she said, and went upstairs.

Scranty stood for a few seconds where she had left him; presently he moved quickly and silently to a small, onyx-topped table on which lay Vera's beaded purse. This he opened and examined. In it were some bills, some silver change, and a flat key of the Yale type. Scranty removed the key, slipped it into

his pocket, snapped the clasp of the purse, and arranged the bead fringe over the onyx rim of the table, exactly as he had found it.

"Women," he philosophized, lighting a cigarette, "prefer their own guilt to their husband's. Anyway," he tossed the match into the open fire, "I'm lucky."

That night, after dinner in a quiet restaurant in Columbus Circle, Hooper, according to his custom, vanished into his study while Vera, in another room, hopelessly tangled her sweater. At eleven o'clock she slipped into the den to say good-night.

"I have a headache," she explained in a voice that strove to sound natural. "I'm going to take some aspirin."

Hooper rose kissed her. "I'm sorry, dear. I'll be very quiet when I come up. I sha'n't disturb you."

With averted eyes she left him and went to her room. Here she slipped out of her frock, threw it across a chair, and then opened the door of her wardrobe. From a row of hangers were suspended her *négligés*, nearly all of some diaphanous material.

She shook her head. Adele would not own any like these. Vera moved into the back of the closet, and presently emerged with a loose flannel wrap of pale blue. This she put on.

She turned off the light and crept up two flights of stairs, closing the door of the nursery on her way. In Adele's room she sank into an uncomfortable chair. Her vigil had commenced.

From downstairs she faintly heard the half-hour chime, the three-quarter hour. Once she thought she heard voices—probably Mary bringing Hooper a supper tray. Her muscles were becoming cramped. She had never realized how uncomfortable a chair can be. At last the hall clock struck midnight. The house seemed wrapped in silence.

Vera stood up. She was so nervous she felt as though she must move about. Another quarter hour . . . then a tiny

sound on the stairs. Taut as a banjo string, she waited.

The door swung quietly open—the light in the hall had been extinguished. The door closed again and Vera turned to ice. Steps advanced uncertainly toward her. A hand, groping in the darkness, touched her shoulder. Eager arms drew her into an embrace that nearly suffocated her.

"Darling," a voice whispered, ever so softly. "Darling. . . ."

Vera's spirit groaned in agony. Had Hooper ever loved *her* just like this? She remembered their first kiss . . . their honeymoon. . . . Now the man's embrace was like a living flame, the flame that leaps from a love that is clandestine. Ardent lips burned her forehead, her cheeks, and her throat; crushed her mouth . . . wounded it.

Oh, it was maddening, worse than anything she had dreamed of! Scalding tears overbrimmed Vera's eyes and were kissed away with murmured endearments. She was lifted in strong arms, and again—her lips.

For long minutes the world lay in ashes at her feet. Then—a sound pierced the tense quiet. The door opened—*other footsteps moved in the room. . . .*

The arms about Vera tightened spasmodically; the face against hers was raised. In futile rage she could have lifted her hand and struck. Adele, she concluded, had left Mrs. Cranston's and returned to her tryst. Probably Hooper, believing he held Adele in his arms, thought the intruder was herself—his wife. Heaven give her strength! In a minute she would confront them both.

The footsteps slid uncertainly forward. There was an aching pause. It seemed as though nothing would ever happen; as though the awful situation would ring on through an Inferno of centuries. Vera summoned her will power. Her lips opened, but no word came from them.

What was that new sound—on the stairs—in the hall—in the doorway? Oh, this was maniacal—an opium dream! *There was a fourth presence in Adele's room.*

The tension broke. Vera screamed shrilly; and the light streamed on.

Clutching the rough tweed of the coat pressed against her, Hooper's wife directed her gaze toward the door. There, framed by it, stood her husband—Hooper Kent himself—a revolver in one hand, a vast blankness in his eyes. Her own shifted from this impossible sight and rested dully on the unheroic figure of Scranty, flattened against the wall. Then with a leaden, drowning sensation Vera forced herself to look upward—upward into the face of the man whose arms still embraced her. The eyes that met hers were pools of dynamic horror.

They belonged to Victor, the handsome chauffeur.

Hopper was the first to speak. "Sweet papa!" he addressed the gathering. "What's the giddy idea?"

After all, it was Scranty who came to the rescue. First he moved cautiously to the wardrobe and poked among Adele's lingerie; then he stooped and looked under the bed.

"You see," he reasoned with Vera, "there's not a soul here."

"Seems like quite a crowd to me," Hooper mildly protested.

"I mean—there's no burglar."

"Oh, was that what you were expecting?"

"Yes. I left my—cigarette case in your study, and ran back for it. But when I got here I found Vera in a frightful panic. She said there was a man upstairs, and she couldn't find you so she called—er—Victor. It seemed he was afraid to come upstairs alone, and he asked me if I would go with him—"

The chauffeur's hopeless expression suddenly altered—by this time he had deposited his mistress on the floor. "Look here, Mr. Davis—" he broke in.

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"I mean to say," Scranty amended, "Victor wasn't afraid, of course. It was Vera. She thought we'd better all come up together."

"And did Victor carry her up?" her husband wondered.

"Oh, no! She—fainted when she heard you. So I told him to hold her while I swatted you with this—this—" He looked inquiringly at an object he held in one hand. It was a powder puff attached to a long celluloid holder, a convenient invention for whitening the back. "Anyway, we thought you were the burglar."

"I see." Hooper found the explanation confusing, but only an unreasonable man would suspect his wife of inviting his oldest friend to witness an affair between her and her chauffeur—or *vice versa*. "I heard something myself when I got in a minute ago. Mary had told me that Georgie and Adele were spending the night at Vera's mother's, and I wondered who could be up here."

At this point Victor, straightening his coat—it was one that had belonged to Hooper—murmured something inarticulate, and got out.

"Look here, Scran," Hooper continued with veiled irritability, "it was mighty decent of you to drag me out to your diggings. Nice bunch of fellows and all that. But I couldn't stick it. I'm too gosh darned busy. I tried to hunt you up, but you'd gone."

"You don't get out enough, old man." Scranty avoided Vera's eyes.

"But I tell you, I waste three hours a day running back and forth from Camden; consequently I have to catch up with my correspondence at night. Victor's been helping me the last week—he has a good head for figures. But he's leaving, worse luck. Going into business."

No one made any comment.

"Going to be married," he added.

"Er, that's fine," said Scranty inanely. "The fair Adele?"

"Uh-huh. I believe so."

"Well, I must get back to the bunch." Scranty, like Victor, headed for the stairs. He had played a Machiavellian hand and lost—by ten minutes. He knew Vera would never speak to him again.

And Vera? Alone with her husband, she burst into tears. "I—I'm sorry," she sobbed hysterically. "I didn't know how hard you had to work. Let's—let's go back to Camden. I'm—t-tired of New York."

With two strides Hooper was beside her. "You mean it, old girl?"

"Yes!" she cried frantically. "Oh, yes!"

He caught her in his arms and kissed her—a husband's kiss.

And Vera, her eyes closed, shivered slightly. Her thoughts were of other kisses, flame-tipped, galvanic. In sudden terror, she resolved never to see Victor again.

But, of course, so far as Scranty was concerned, she cheated; that is, she didn't give him his onions.

After all, they would only have made him weep.



PRISCILLA'S CURL

By Robert E. Dean

'Twas small, 'tis true, but very fair—
 A dainty, gleaming, silken snare,
 Which some blest, wandering breath of air
 Brushed o'er my cheek, and then and there,
 With cheeks aglow and thoughts awlirl,
 I wondered if I'd really dare——
 Priscilla's curl.

I wondered, too, if she would care,
 And, wondering, leaned above her chair,
 Pressed to my lips the wisp of hair.
 She rose and left me standing there,
 With cheeks aglow and thoughts awlirl,
 For in my hand remained——
 Priscilla's curl!



ALMOST INNOCENT!

By Dorothy Thomson

“WHO is that woman with the ash-blonde hair and enormous dark eyes?” demanded Michael, abruptly.

Deliberately Alexander Ogden placed his empty tea-cup on a low teakwood stand. Irony curved the thin lips and amusement crinkled the myriad lines about his small black eyes,—old eyes, but bright as a robin’s, terribly wise, missing not a thing.

“I have been waiting five minutes for that question,” he answered in a soft, smooth voice that seemed to have all emotion, all betraying modulation, ironed out of it. “The lady’s name is Vanita Sherrill.”

Michael’s bold blue eyes, which had been concentrated with full favor on the slight, azure-clad figure at the far end of Mrs. Maiden’s drawing-room, returned, with quick suspicion, to Ogden.

“What do you know about her?” he asked in his imperious manner, thinking how like a dressed-up weasel old Ogden appeared.

“Shall I present you to her?” neatly side-stepped Ogden, and it was as if he rolled some sweet, secret morsel beneath his tired, old tongue.

“Do,” assented Michael eagerly, and followed Ogden’s fastidious figure in its tortuous threading of the long room. Michael’s head loomed far above Ogden’s. He kept their quarry in constant sight. She seemed especially lovely, a rather fragile young woman with ash-blonde hair banded low on her forehead, and her great dark eyes in a fringe of black lashes, very animated as she talked. She was a pure Saxon type, her skin of porcelain purity and fineness. Her frock

of smoke-gray and azure was infinitely becoming. A woman well worth meeting!

“Miss Sherrill,” said Ogden in his oily voice, “may I present Michael Hallett?” His darting black eyes compassed the little group about the girl. “The man who does not put his trust in marriage meets the lady who thinks ditto,” he announced, with malicious satisfaction.

A little gust of laughter like a naughty breeze sprang from that smart circle. The red of annoyance flared in Michael’s cheek and was repeated in the young woman’s, but she tilted her soft chin up at him, her words coming with swift, frank appeal.

“You think as I do, Mr. Hallett? That the time must come, is coming, when we shall have no marriage? And, therefore, no divorces, no marital harness to curb, and fret, and harass, and torment? No linked misery?”

Michael was astonished, but terribly pleased.

“Well,” he beamed broadly down at her, “I am thirty-eight and have never been married. I guess that answers that!”

Another gust of laughter from the group, spontaneous, bubbling with secret mirth. The little clique broke up, scattered, still smiling, while Vanita Sherrill turned her delicate, flushed face to Michael.

“Why do they seem so amused, and why is Mrs. Chetwood whispering?”

Michael sank comfortably on the divan beside her, his handsome face with its impudent blue eyes and sensuous, indulgent lips quite sober now, screening a joyous satisfaction within him.

"They are idiots," he confided amiably. "Cheerful idiots. Tell me about your ideas on free love and liberty, Miss Sherrill."

Vanita Sherrill appeared shocked. Her slim, white fingers fluttered in protest.

"I certainly don't believe in love and license. Licentious love-making—horrible! But I do believe in matings—rare matings, mind you!—where there is a supreme and splendid passion. And from these unions will spring children, beautiful, intelligent, perfect in mind and body. A new and splendid generation to carry on our faltering civilization. That is our only hope. You agree with me?"

"Certainly! Most certainly, Miss Sherrill."

Lovely maniac! He knew now why Mrs. Chetwood and her crowd had chuckled. He, Michael Hallett, notorious gallant, held a viewpoint similar to Vanita Sherrill's; but reached by such a widely divergent route! His—Michael's—had been no prim pathway!

Vanita was straddling her hobby now, riding it hard, her dark eyes sparkling, her rose-colored mouth pouring adorably into "no's" and "so's," and curling itself cutely around big words like "psychological" and "pathology."

Michael watched those exquisite lips. By Jove! hers was no prim Puritan's mouth! Not if he knew women! Those curved, red lips were ripe, ready, waiting for a man's kisses. *His* kisses! The young line swelling from throat to breast was surely destined as a fair pillow for a man's dark head. *His* head! Vaguely he caught various soft-jumbled phrases. "Education of the masses." "Promiscuous love-making." . . . "It's the chain that irks—the chain we see and feel. It galls us. Narrows us and our children."

"Do you think so?" she shot, with sudden sweetness, at him.

"No!" declared Michael, firmly. "Most certainly not!"

"What!" She shrank from him in horror. "You think that eugenics should not be compulsory in the curriculum of our public schools?"

"Yes!" cried Michael hastily. "Most certainly, yes!" And he drove a fist with furious emphasis into his open palm. He must listen more attentively to this curious drivel. What the devil was eugenics? He seemed to have heard the word before.

"Where did you pick up this line?" he demanded presently. "Get interested in this sort of thing, y'know?"

"Oh, after I graduated from college. I've read lots of books on all sorts of modern subjects, and I've written one myself—it hasn't been published, though—'The Modern Woman and Her Mate.' I'm interested in lots of movements. I've solicited funds lately for the Recreation League."

"That's what I believe in!" cried Michael heartily. "Recreation! Lots of it!"

The lovely lady leaned back against the divan, regarding him with suspicious eyes. She was not accustomed to unanimous agreement. She was used to being descried as ultra-modern. That was where Vanita got her excitement.

"Probably you would like to subscribe to it, then. No time like the present. One hundred dollars is the membership fee, Mr. Hallett."

"*Touché!*" Michael's mouth was a little grim as he drew forth a check-book, set down a one and inserted two neat zeroes after it. Well, every woman had her price. He would collect later.

Michael's fingers touched her fluttering ones over the white bit of paper and his blue eyes, insolent enough under protecting lids, swept the soft length of her.

"As we are so interested in the same subjects, it might be agreeable if we should dine together."

She hesitated, her fingers fluttering in that quaint, familiar gesture.

"To-morrow evening at eight. Palace," announced Michael masterfully. He rose and grinned genially down upon her. "Where shall I call for you, Miss Sherrill?"

"I'm stopping at the Bellevue," replied Vanita almost resentfully. She watched his broad back as he strode away, never turning. For no reason at all, her breath was coming twice as fast from between those rose-leaf lips.

Striding toward Mrs. Maiden to bid her good-afternoon, Michael encountered Ogden in a corner, silent as a snake. As all-seeing, too. Michael addressed him with brutal frankness.

"What d'ye know about the lady, Ogden?"

"She's from New England. About twenty-five, I should judge. An orphan with a neat fortune."

"Ah!" exclaimed Michael, with curious satisfaction. "I understand. Of course, if she has scads of money, she need not bother with matrimony."

Ogden permitted himself a small grimace as he shook his head.

"You're wrong there, my dear fellow. Quite. I think she is in earnest. I understand that she has never—ah—in-dulged in an affair."

Michael raised his heavy eyebrows.

"H-hum. Lacking a home and a husband, even a lover, she has filled her mind with curious playthings. But, after all, she is only a woman, Ogden. Only a woman!"

He smiled significantly and swung out the door, while old Ogden looked after him and wet his dry old lips in anticipation.

And so Vanita Sherrill dined with Michael Hallett not one night, but many nights. And, in return, Michael was her constant companion at innumerable committee meetings, and teas, and tiresome lectures. The portent of these, even the phraseology, drifted over the man's head like dusty gray clouds. His bold blue eyes were for Vanita Sherrill. He

learned every line of her—curve of lip, long throat sloping into the gentle breast, the ridiculously innocent curl at the nape of the neck, the way her blonde hair drooped low on the forehead, leaving a narrow ribbon of white skin above the dark hazel eyes, the appeal of the moist pink lips, parted in momentary approval.

"It's a damn shame," ruminated Michael, eyes very keen, very desirous, under heavy lids, "that the girl wastes her emotions on rot like this. It's time she had a teacher."

And while Michael watched Vanita, his world watched Michael, chuckling up its sleeve with anticipatory glee. The chuckle broke into a roar when one week's issue of *The Tattler* was crisply unfolded at late breakfast tables.

THE MAN WHO SIMPLY WON'T MARRY MEETS THE WOMAN WHO JUST WOULDN'T!

When T. N. T. Meets Up With a Nice
New Bomb, What Happens?

It Is To Laugh!

Vanita Sherrill's cheeks flamed as she read the insinuating paragraph beneath. Her color was still high, her lips tremulous, when she answered Michael's voice over the telephone.

"Have you seen *The Tattler*?" she demanded breathlessly.

"That rot!" he retorted cheerfully. "I think old Ogden coins that scurrilous stuff. Stick it in the stove, Vanita."

Her cheeks flamed into distressful fire at the secret caress in that "Vanita."

"Those half-veiled hints! I don't understand!" she faltered.

"You wouldn't!" he replied promptly. "It's just the braying of an ass. Don't pay any attention to it. Listen, Vanita. To-morrow is my birthday, and I want you to help me celebrate it. Will you motor down to Ocean Shore Inn with me for dinner?"

She promised, that faint, familiar flutter in her breast stirring her. It had stirred her more than once lately. She had no more hung up the receiver than Ogden himself was announced. Had he come to view with his avid old eyes the immediate result of his attack?

Vanita received him in her sitting-room. She was very pretty in her frock of soft blue crêpe, and cool enough now, except for the slim, ringless fingers torturing *The Tattler* into a hard, tight roll.

"Have you seen that wicked old weekly, *The Tattler*?" she challenged abruptly, her eyes dark and dilated, mouth mutinous. "There is a spiteful paragraph about Mr. Hallett and me."

Ogden nodded, appearing very sober.

"It is cleverly written, isn't it?" he asked ingenuously. "The city is laughing."

The girl's breast rose in a gust of anger. Her delicate nostrils flared. Ogden wisely took shelter behind a barricade of amazing words.

"Hallett is such a notorious scalawag, y'see. It isn't possible he has deceived you, Miss Sherrill? You know, of course, that his views on matrimony are limited to—er—his personal experiences."

Vanita's delicate eyebrows met.

"Please explain, Mr. Ogden."

"That, whereas your liberal views as to love and marriage if mistaken, as some of us think, and too advanced, nevertheless are sincere and quite unselfish, Hallett's are simply sensual. Refusing to confine himself to one woman, he has enjoyed many. One at a time, though. One at a time, Miss Sherrill. When his heart is attracted, his eye is single. For several years it was Babbette DuBose, Babbette of 'Sunshine Sadie.' In recent months it has been Edna Edwards, an entrancing young widow, the one who sued young Palmer for half a million. His taste roves, Miss Sherrill. Roves pretty constantly."

Vanita Sherrill had dropped smooth

white lids over eyes that might so easily betray. The delicate profile she turned to Ogden was almost cold. But the slim fingers, shredding *The Tattler* with harried intensity, narrowed Ogden's eyes and wet his lips with anticipation.

"You are warning me," she asked coolly, "against becoming a victim to Mr. Hallett's fascinating personality?"

"You admit he is fascinating?" asked Ogden, and fairly smacked his lips. "Well, most women are willing victims. Hallett has a way. He most distinctly has a way! Thinks this is a man's world, y'see, and woman something rather less than a rib, something to be cajoled and conquered and caressed and cast away. Very deplorable view, Miss Sherrill."

"I think it is rather amusing," retorted Vanita carelessly.

Pride and anger had steadied her now so that she could raise her eyes to Ogden, could smile. He could not know that her heart had sunk of its own dreadful weight within her, and that her throat ached and throbbed with a peculiar physical pain, as if the man before her had taken it in his evil hands and tried to strangle the very life out of it.

Her visitor reluctantly rose to go. He had seen smoke but not fire. Bits of paper shredded by cruel fingers—but a composed and smiling countenance. The girl was not quite the pretty fool he had thought her.

As for Vanita, she bade Ogden a careless, smiling good afternoon. But when the door had shut upon him, the smile died swiftly on the pretty mouth, the hazel eyes grew positively black, and feminine fury etched two savage lines between them.

She sat quite motionless at her little spinet desk for nearly an hour. When she rose, there was a new expression on her face—a certain hardness, a decision, that had never visited there before.

Michael, swinging along in his swag-gar, gray roadster the following evening,

found Vanita Sherrill at his side very agreeable to look at. In her soft, muffling black coat that half-hid her round, childish chin, she was lovelier than usual. There was something new, strange, about her, too. Perhaps it was the sweet, sidling glance she cast at him occasionally—new for Vanita! Perhaps a high, hurried note in the soft voice, unusual roses in her cheeks.

Michael's indulgent mouth took a satisfied curve. The girl had learned rapidly. He had her right where he wanted her now. Ah, he was an apt teacher! Never had a failure.

They reached Ocean Shore Inn at eight and dined at the famous restaurant on the beach, along with a number of smartly-dressed people, none of whom Michael or Vanita knew. Afterward, they strolled along the strip of beach, Vanita's high bronze heels sinking deep in the damp sand, her fair hair an enchanting halo in the moonlight. Michael's cigar was fragrantly close. He walked very near to Vanita, so near that their shadows merged into one upon the sand. Gradually Vanita's gay, spasmodic chatter broke and died away. Michael, too, grew quiet. Ominously quiet. It was a palpitating silence that hung over them. A rosy, tremulous silence, full of soft, hidden things, of mystery, of enchantment. Passion stalked with them along that wet and silent beach, passion so vital, so disturbing, so compelling, that it was like a third person who ran beside them, scarlet cloak fluttering, sly voice breaking into soft, urgent whispers, cajoling, coaxing, laughing, secretly promising. . . .

Vanita heard the whisper. Michael heard it, too, only to Michael it was loud as a snare-drum, urging him to action. Yet when he turned at last to the girl beside him, he said the last thing she had expected.

"Shall we turn back now, Vanita?"

Vanita turned a distressed, white face towards him, her expression such a dubi-

ous mixture of amazement and chagrin that Michael bit his lip hard to keep from delighted laughter.

"Yes, let us," she agreed rather flatly, and her companion helped her gravely into his car, and in continued silence they started homeward.

They had not gone far, however, when Michael purred to a halt. They were before a railing of wrought iron with an arched gateway which supported a quaint iron lantern.

"That's my house, up there," he explained. "Beyond the gate. You can just see the red roof. I take jaunts down here, especially in summer. It is interesting, rather quaint. Would you like to see it, Vanita?"

Vanita stirred uneasily.

"There is someone living there?"

"Caretaker. Accounts for the lights."

He whirled in over the winding driveway and stopped before the doorway of the cream-colored stucco house topped with red tile.

"I've an interesting jumble of things in here. I've scoured the country round about for bits of old, quaint furniture. And there is a staircase rail of twisted, polished manzanita—boughs I picked up myself on the sand dunes this summer."

He ushered her inside the door, swung it tight behind them.

Lights. Lights everywhere. Dim, discreet little lights.

"This is the living-room. That bay window opens on a mighty pretty rose-garden. This is the dining-room, rather good, eh? This is a sort of breakfast room. This the kitchen—who's interested in kitchens? This is the sun porch. Like the hickory stuff? Rather out-of-date, they tell me, but I'm keen for it."

"Where is the caretaker?" inquired Vanita restlessly. "It's positively eerie, with lights everywhere, and not a soul in sight."

"Funny!" commented Michael. "I told Joe Loo, who looks after things, that I might drop in to-night."

Vanita's swift glance met such look of severe innocence that she was instantly suspicious.

"Well, let us go now," she said hurriedly, and pulled the fur collar of her coat high about her throat.

Michael smiled a little at that instinctive gesture.

"I want you to look upstairs first," he announced coolly. "You have only seen half of my house."

"Some other time. I want to go, please."

"Now!" demanded Michael, and his tone was masterful, not to be denied, resisted. He led her to the queer, twisted stairway.

The girl mounted reluctantly to an upper balcony, where Michael opened a door.

"This," he announced, indicating a sternly handsome apartment with furnishings of unpolished mahogany and hangings of chintz, "is my room. And this door opening from it—" he ushered her before him, closed the door deftly behind them—"this is your room, Vanita."

With slow, reluctant comprehension, the girl's eyes travelled about her. It was a pink-and-white room of rosewood and laces. There was a *chaise-longue*, heaped with embroidered cushions, and a bed canopied and festooned. There was a white bearskin rug on the floor, and an open door gave promise of a white-tiled bath beyond.

Her eyes returned to the canopied bed. Upon it various intimate garments had been flung, silken, rosy, emanating a delicate but penetrating perfume.

"I have always wanted to see you," declared Michael, "in soft, silken, generous things instead of those stingy, little-girl frocks you lean towards." His voice was cajoling, caressing. "Vanita!" His arms went out towards her. "Sweetheart! Y'know I've lost my hard old head over you!"

Vanita stepped back from him, her

head high and contemptuous, delicate nostrils flaring.

"This is the 'honey hive' I've heard about? This is where the DuBose girl used to come! That Edna Edwards! I am flattered to be their successor!"

"You know about them?" Michael shrugged his shoulders. "And still you wanted to come, Vanita? My dear, I am flattered."

"You are a libertine and a liar!" announced Vanita distinctly through tight little white teeth. "I never wanted to come here. Liar!"

Michael waved humorous hands. He leaned against the door and spoke, his voice pleasantly tolerant.

"You lie to yourself, silly child! That damned starched streak in you is forever fighting with your passionate, primitive, feminine longings. Don't deny it! Out there on the beach you were ready, you were crazy with eagerness for me to take you in my arms! Don't deny it! A woman with a mouth like yours can't go through life without a lover. Sooner or later—it might as well be now."

"I will be the judge of that!" she cried furiously.

"Why are you so angry? I'm not asking you to step outside your own theories. Isn't that what you profess, dearest? That a great and overpowering and mutual passion should not be thwarted?"

"But I will choose my own mate!" she retorted hotly.

"You will choose me, because you must!" said Michael, and below the velvet of his voice there was the ring of steel. "And let's not talk about it any more. I'm tired of talk. There has been altogether too much talk lately."

He reached her in three strides and, with a sweep of his arms, had unfastened her heavy coat and tossed it on the bed. His strong arms held her shoulders in a grip from which it would be mere lunacy to try to escape.

"A kiss, Vanita?"

Her lips stubbornly refused him. Her dark eyes blazed with almost hysterical hostility into his own.

Michael laughed a little, studying her white defiance with exultant eyes. Suddenly he shook her almost savagely, his fingers biting into her arms.

"Wake up, you little fool! Take your sweets when they are offered you! You stubborn, lovely, provoking idiot!"

Vanita's lips parted in protest. Ruthlessly, Michael's mouth closed upon her own. Unheeding her first, faint, muffled cry, he held her sealed in a long, passionate embrace, her head thrown back in unavailing struggle, her eyelids closed under his caresses. When at last he released her, Michael was white and breathless.

"I love you, Vanita," he stumbled.

Vanita was white too, except for some curious red splotches that Michael's rough lips had left upon her cheeks. She stepped back from him, leaning one palm against a chairback. Her eyes wore a curious, startled look.

Michael stared at her.

"By Gad!" he cried exultantly, his voice ringing out loudly in the room that seemed filled with at tense, restless expectancy. "You look as if you had just waked up, Vanita. You do! You look as if you had found something you had been searching for."

Vanita said nothing. She did not move, but he could see the pulse in her slim white throat throbbing, and two flags of pink rose to her pale cheeks and fluttered there.

"I will give you five minutes," whispered Michael tenderly. "Five, Vanita." He stooped over and kissed the white hollow below her tremulous throat. There was an air of triumph all about him. He went out of the room and closed the door softly behind him.

Five minutes was long to wait. It was five minutes too long. But Michael kept his word, and only when the last second had expired did he swing the

door open softly, and blue eyes ardent and arms wide, crossed the threshold. Whereupon he encountered probably the most unpleasant shock of his life.

Vanita was awaiting him. Oh, yes, indeed! But not in the rosy, betraying garments he had prepared for her. She still wore her soft, jade-green dinner frock. On her mouth was a wry little smile. In her right hand she held a tiny, pearl-handled pistol, aimed in the general direction of Michael's heart.

Michael's arms dropped and his expectant lips slackened a little. But instantly he recovered his abominable cheerfulness.

"Holy Pat! What have we here?" he cried in amused consternation.

"We have here," retorted Vanita crisply, "a badly-spoiled libertine and a woman who does not choose to become his mistress. You may sit on the *chaise-longue*. Fold your arms. Do as I tell you!"

"You take the wind out of my sails," complained Michael ruefully. However, he obeyed cheerfully enough. "And where did you get the infinitesimal toy, little sweetheart?"

"From my coat pocket. And before that from Blum and Company, on Clay Street. Late yesterday afternoon I hired a taxi, rode out way past St. Christopher's Wood and practiced shooting at bottles stuck on a wooden fence railing."

"All that trouble just for me!" apologized Michael.

"I used to do that as a child, practice with all sorts of firearms on my Uncle Jed's ranch in Wyoming, where I spent my summers. I'm really rather clever at it. Turn your head to the left. Do you see that shepherdess statuette on the mantelpiece?"

There was a click. The shepherdess's crook tinkled to the floor where it broke into tiny fragments.

"H-hum. Very neatly done," pronounced Michael soberly. "And would you pot me like a clay pigeon, Vanita?"

"If you don't do as I direct," she asserted coldly. "You will notice I offered you the *longue*. It looks as though we would stay here all night."

"What!" cried Michael, incredulously, and almost leaped from the *longue*.

"Sit still!" she ordered sharply.

Michael slumped back, bewildered.

"Like this?" he demanded. "I twiddling my thumbs, and you guarding me like a criminal?" He paused, to add sulkily. "If that's the way you feel about it, I'll drive you back to town."

Vanita laughed shortly.

"I prefer to have you as you are—several yards from my 'toy,' thank you. You don't expect me to trust you after this? I might lock the door on you here, but I don't know how to run the car, and there doesn't seem to be anyone within miles of here. So we shall just have to stay till morning."

"Ah! You won't be afraid of me in the morning, sweet?"

"I think to-morrow morning you will see things differently. And don't call me pet names. I'm not your 'sweet' and you know it."

They stared hard at each other. Vanita rested the hand in which she held her pretty little weapon upon a round rosewood table. Her face was flushed and her blonde hair, disordered by Michael's wicked embrace, had allowed tiny curls to zigzag across her cheek.

"Y'know, you have a positively wanton look," exploded Michael. "That's you, again. Denying all your natural impulses. Darling, you are such an imbecile!"

Vanita tilted her nose scornfully.

"There's some sort of proverb," confessed Michael winningly, "about given the name, you may as well take the game? You might as well extract all the honey from the situation, my dear girl. Because if we stay here all night—oh, la, la! What a tidbit for the gossips! Ogden will stick scarlet letters to us and post us in next week's *Tattler*."

Vanita scowled, but her head and hand remained steady.

"And how will Ogden know?"

"Ogden is ubiquitous. That's his business. Besides, I saw him this morning and mentioned I was running you down to Ocean Shore Inn to-night. He will be spying, I presume, in some way or other."

"You fool!" cried Vanita furiously, her breast rising. She glowered at him, her eyes dark and stormy under her straight brows.

"Don't call me pet names," mimicked Michael. "Vanita, be reasonable! The situation is novel enough but damned distasteful. Why, I had expected to have you in my arms by this time—pliant, yielding, soft as velvet, sweet as honey. If you could only get rid of that Quaker complex——"

"I think that will be about all from you, Michael Hallett."

"You're a traitor to your theories," complained the man bitterly. "You preach freedom and you're as narrow as your neighbor. By Gad, when I kissed you there was plenty of fire, I tell you. I'll bet you never enjoyed anything so much in all your life."

Vanita's face was white with fury. She steadied her hand on the table.

"I've half a notion to pull the trigger," she declared coldly.

Michael stared at her curiously. Perhaps she might! There was that hysterical look again in the hazel eyes, and a repressed white line about the lips. He couldn't fathom her. But she had never looked half so lovely. Hers was an arresting beauty—the dark pools of her eyes, the soft droop of the blonde hair that had the fragrance of roses against his mouth. She was untouched, virginal . . . terribly to be desired . . . that rare thing—beauty, fully ripened, shrinking from a foreign touch. . . .

Before Michael was aware of it, he had dropped into uneasy slumber, his handsome head resting against the great

pile of cushions. He awoke some time later with a little start. Vanita was keeping her solitary vigil. She did not seem to have stirred from her original position. But there was a queer look on her face that the waking man caught—a peculiar softness, a drooping relaxation, almost a tenderness of line, brooding, oddly maternal.

"I was dreaming," Michael informed her, "that you were in my arms. Soft and quiet. Yielding at last, Vanita."

Her odd expression fled. Her face seemed to harden.

"How insane of you!"

Michael grinned. "Y'know, I hate to keep you awake all night like this, my dear girl."

"You will pay for it in the morning," she hinted darkly.

"What d'y'e mean?" he demanded curiously.

"You will see," she promised promptly.

She refused to talk further, and Michael, after some mumbled protests, drifted again into sleep, the first real night's rest the gay Michael had enjoyed for some months. He awoke to the sound of voices. It was broad daylight. Vanita was addressing his Chinese servant, Joe Loo, who stood just inside the doorway, staring with heathen horror at the deadly little weapon on the rosewood table.

As Michael opened his eyes and grunted, Joe Loo, with a low salaam, backed out of the door. They could hear his slippered feet pattering swiftly down the stairway.

"Joe Loo," said Vanita, "whom I understand, you dismissed for last night, has returned by your orders to prepare breakfast. I would like some coffee. We may as well go downstairs, I suppose."

"You're not afraid of me this morning?" inquired Michael, stretching frankly, adjusting his tie and beaming genially at her.

Vanita shook her head.

"Not any more," she said with decision. She slipped on her coat and dropped the pistol into its pocket.

"You might show me the way to the breakfast room."

It was a queer breakfast. Neither was communicative and both were frankly hungry. Joe Loo brought fragrant coffee and crisp, brown waffles, his feet shufflingly eager, his yellow face a comical mixture of alarm and question. Nothing like this had ever happened before! The white woman waved a gun and wanted things. Even his master submitted. Joe Loo's world was standing on its head. In vain he looked mutely at his master for commands.

Vanita, her healthy hunger satisfied, had arisen from the breakfast table. Michael, rather grave—for Michael—rose also, looking at her expectantly.

"We are going back to town," announced the girl. "And there is an errand to do on the way."

In almost complete silence they whirled along the highway in the fresh, sunny morning. Even Michael's buoyant spirits were checked. There was a certain menace in Vanita's manner. What the devil was the girl going to do? It was funny, the way she had him at her mercy!

"Turn up B Street," said Vanita presently. "Now stop at the corner."

They were before a grim, gray building. The Hall of Records.

Vanita jumped out and faced him. The wind blew blonde curls over her excited cheeks.

"You must come with me," she cried, her voice shaking. "You must walk beside me. See, look! I have the pistol in my pocket."

"Of course, I'll come," said Michael blandly.

They traversed a long corridor to a door marked "Marriage License Bureau." Inside there was a long counter and two clerks, who stared at them with a rather bored curiosity.

FOR RENT OR SALE—ONE MAN

By Edward François

HAVING curled herself into a pink-chiffon and yellow-silk ball in one corner of the couch, Florette made an alluring picture. So provoking were her charms in that state of negligent *négligé*—one bare knee laughing out with its pretty dimple from above the rolled-down grayness of her sheer hosiery, one equally undraped arm encircling the molten gold of her hair,—that Stuart Raynor just had to. . .

And so he did.

Certainly he did kiss her. About a dozen times or thereabouts. He was really too flustered to come to definite conclusions about the exact number. But ardent kisses they were and long and vehement.

"Darling!" he murmured.

Florette groaned—inwardly. Outwardly she smiled her darndest and quite capably returned the kisses. And she called him a boresome, bungling fool, and quite a poor technician when it came to making love,—inwardly again. Her audible reply to his tender remark was a somewhat belated, nevertheless acceptable repetition of his own word:

"Darling!"

Stuart Raynor accepted that spoken caress of hers at its face value. Correspondingly, he was very happy. He pressed Florette very close, lingered with due affection upon her small oval face, upon her mouth, her neck and rosy fingers, and he whispered:

"Angel!"

"Not on your life, dearie!" Florette protested in a voice appropriately hushed and saccharine. "*You* are the angel!"

This time she meant every word she said. He *was* an angel, she realized. Her angel. Not one of the celestial kind, of course. Just a financial one, which is far more important to ladies of the chorus,—at least to ladies of the chorus of Florette's type. For, while she was more or less concerned about an ultimate acquaintance with heavenly creatures who had nice white wings and harps, she preferred to spend this earthly existence with mundane angels endowed with lots of ready cash and liberal pocketbooks and kindly dispositions.

That was the reason for Florette's reasonably tolerant attitude toward Stuart. Her rent had to be paid, and he paid it; she had to have furs and dresses and diamonds and bootleg delicacies, and he supplied them; she had to settle laundry bills and taxi bills and modiste bills, and his checks were as good as the next man's.

Yet he was a terrible bore, she knew, and Florette was heartily sick of him. The fact that he was exceedingly generous helped but little. She knew plenty of girls who had clever, interesting, presentable men quite as open-handed as Stuart, but without Stuart's shortcomings at the same time.

The problem was too difficult to be settled right then and there. Nor was Florette inclined to ponder too much over it. For the time being, she decided, it would be necessary to "keep him on the string." After that? Oh, well, some more desirable man would come along and then she would just tell Stuart to seek the great open spaces outside her door.

He was still holding her in his arms.

"Tell me, dearest, that you are hungry for my kisses." Stuart had a sickeningly sentimental vein in him and he generally got lyrical without previous notice. "Come, tell me."

"You bet I am," nodded Florette. "But that don't mean at all that I'm not a damn' sight hungrier for some decent food. How about running out to some feedery?"

Stuart was evidently hurt. Mention of food did not go well with his melting mood. He sighed:

"Again? We had dinner at eight."

"But now its ten," she reminded him. "Do you expect me to starve? I knew a chorine once that tried to live on love and. . ."

"Don't lots of them do that?"

"I said *on* love, not *off* love," Florette pointed out. "Anyway, the only part she could get after a while was playing a rattlesnake off-stage, because her bones made such a terrible racket. Hope you don't want to see me being cast for a skeleton in the closet, or something like that. Because——"

This promised to be an endless speech, and Stuart thought it wise to capitulate in time.

"All right, get dressed then, and we'll hunt up some eatables."

Within the surprisingly short time of one hour Florette was ready. She expressed a desire for visiting some place where dancing and incidental cocktails could also be had. Stuart, while regretting the sacrificing of many possible pleasant hours in her apartment, mournfully complied.

"All right, let's make it the 'Gilded Lobster'."

Soon Florette was seated at the well-appointed table of the cabaret, before her the luxurious array of numberless dishes, around her the blatant elegance of the establishment. This was the atmosphere she enjoyed.

"Let's dance," Stuart suggested.

Florette, who was as fond of dancing

as the next girl, knew by previous experience that the only music to which Stuart could fox-trot was Chopin's "Funeral March." So she merely shook her head, pretending deep interest in the chicken *à la king* before her.

But the next moment, raising her eyes, she met the gaze of a most breathtakingly handsome young man who was seated at the next table. He flashed her a smile. Florette, who was a lady, promptly turned her eyes away, withholding him with instantaneous indifference. But it was hard to resist that good-looking male face. Therefore she looked up again, pursed her lips a bit, flashed back a piquantly provocative smile. He formed a silent question with his becoming lips. Florette, guessing the nature of the inquiry, nodded discreet assent. Promptly the young man rose and approached their table.

"Oh, hello," Florette exclaimed with a great show of surprise, once he was standing beside her. And, turning to Stuart who had caught none of the preliminary pantomime, she presented her new friend:

"Stuey, here's one of the birds that used to swing with me in the hammock in that garden number of 'Sweet Papa.' His name is. . ."

"Bud Bartlett," the stranger quickly caught his cue.

"Bud Bartlett is correct," said Florette, with a look of grateful appreciation at Bud. "Shake hands with Stuart Raynor."

The handshake took place. Stuart was somewhat suspicious, but could say nothing. He kept quiet even when the young man unceremoniously seated himself at their table and devoted himself to Florette with all the fervor of a long-lost friend.

And, when the orchestra once more blazed forth its saxophonic triumph, Florette was quite willing to be swept to the floor for a dance with Bud.

"It was clever of you to tell that old

geezer about my having been in the same show with you. How did you ever come to invent it?"

"Well," laughed Florette, feeling quite thrilled in his embrace, "I couldn't possibly say that you were a total stranger, could I?"

"Sure not! What's your name, honey?"

Florette gave her name. She gave more than that, in fact. Her address, her telephone number, her invitation to call. Bud made mental notes of the information, pressed her arm in agreement and said:

"You bet!"

He departed a short time after that—without the formality of paying his check, however,—and Florette went out of her way to be especially pleasant to Stuart, who was inclined to be resentful.

"He's a terrible pest, that Bud fellow," she complained, assuming a bored expression, "but I simply had to be nice to him. You know how it is when you meet people of the profession——"

Whether Stuart knew or not, he seemed relieved. And the rest of the evening was marked by complete harmony between Florette and her "angel."

II

In less than two weeks Florette succeeded in convincing herself that she was head over heels in love with Bud. The two weeks saw many of their clandestine meetings, a hasty week-end trip to a little Connecticut resort, stolen moments and hours up in her apartment. Love on such a wholesale scale was an entirely new emotion to Florette and she reveled in the luxury of thrilling heart-pangs. In short, she had a lot of fun nowadays.

There were several flies in the ointment, however. Bud was so poor that, in Florette's picturesque phrase, "if prices of B. V. D.'s went according to

the number of buttons on them, he could afford nothing but one with a safety pin." Bud had no perceptible trade, occupation, calling or profession. He floated about in the world, with means of support unknown.

Another trouble was that purely economic considerations forced Florette to continue accepting Stuart's attentions in spite of her growing distaste for his company. Yet what was she to do? Love was beautiful and filled with romance—but romance was not filling. And Florette's over-indulged stomach needed considerable filling, at frequent intervals. Therefore it was out of the question to dismiss Stuart.

The two men, furthermore, were quite properly jealous of each other. Stuart was always suspecting things that he had every right in the world to suspect, while Bud swore that Florette must make a choice between himself and that "big saphead of a Stuart." Florette, at such times, hastened to assure him:

"Don't you worry. I'm getting rid of him pretty soon."

On the other hand, she tried to soothe Stuart's hurt feelings by saying:

"Gosh, dearie, you don't for a minute think that a poor fish like Bud could ever interest me? He just drops up here now and then and I can't exactly throw him out, him and me being members of the profession."

And all the while she sought for a solution of the problem. The ideal thing, she knew, would have been to invent some method whereby both Bud's affections and Stuart's money could be retained. But, as yet, she could hit upon no way.

The unexpected visit of Miss Dottie Velour, one morning, seemed to bring solution nearer, however. Florette was lying in bed just then, resting after a heavily alcoholic night spent in the company of Bud. Dottie popped into the room, draped herself along the rail of Florette's bed and promptly proceeded

to pour out the assorted miseries of her twenty-year-old heart.

"Dearie," she lamented, "you got no idea how awful hard I'm hit. It's more than three months since I lost that fat broker of mine, and I don't seem to be able to locate another meal-ticket. You sure are lucky to have this rich guy of yours."

Florette propped herself up on one pink elbow. She grimaced:

"You make me laugh, kiddo! Where do you get that lucky stuff? I'm sick and tired of Stuart!"

"Wish I had him," sighed Dottie. "There ain't a thing I wouldn't do to hold on to him."

Florette smiled. How funny it was, she reflected, that Dottie should be so envious of something like Stuart. She was about to voice rather uncomplimentary remarks concerning Mr. Raynor, when something suddenly occurred to her. Here was Dottie . . . pretty, willing, eager . . . fully as good-looking as herself. Bet Stuart would find her very attractive were he to. . . Well!

"You honestly mean that, Dot? Would you really like to get Stuart?"

"Say! You bet your life I would. But what's the good of wishing for the impossible? You got him tied to you pretty well."

"Nothing is impossible," Florette sagely observed. "You know I got a big heart, don't you?"

Dottie snickered. She knew Florette well enough to have no illusions concerning the other's generosity.

"Yeah! I still remember the time you raised that terrible row because I took that jar of cold-cream off your dressing table."

"That was different," Florette pointed out. "You swiped it, dearie, and I got sore. If you had asked for it, I would have even thrown in a couple of sticks of eye-lashine for good measure. Besides, what's the use of fighting over that now? I always liked you, Dot,

and I'm going to prove it now. You can have Stuart."

"Stop kidding me, will you? Swell chance I got of even getting near him with you around."

"All the chances in the world. I'm willing to give him to you,—half of him, anyway. It's this way. I'm in love with some guy. I ain't going to say who he is, because that's my own secret. And I don't want Stuart hanging on to me any longer. You can go ahead and take him,—on one condition."

"If it's that mink wrap you had your eye on two weeks ago, you're on."

"No, you just keep your mink, and all your other wraps, including that dirty pink one you float around back stage in. The price of Stuart is fifty percent of everything you can squeeze out of him."

"I don't get you," said Dottie, though she moved nearer with rising interest.

"Well, the idea is that I can't be expected to starve just because I'm in love with some guy who is poor. So I'll just rent Stuart out to you. You go ahead and vamp him and work him good and strong for money. He's easy in that way. And you are to swear on your word of honor that you'll always give me fifty percent—"

"I'll swear on a stack of bibles as high as the Woolworth Tower," promised Dottie. "But how will I have to go about putting the yoke on Stuart Raynor when he's so terribly in love with you?"

"You just leave that to me. I'll manage everything. Watch me deliver him to you in good shape."

"Any shape will do, dearie," waved Dottie. "I ain't so particular about his appearance, as long as he retains a healthy right hand with which to sign a couple of substantial checks."

They kissed each other, arranged for another meeting soon, once more reaffirmed terms and conditions of the contract,—then Dottie went away, very happy and very grateful. Florette lay

back on her pillow and several times congratulated herself on the good work accomplished this morning. Had she ever studied Greek, she would now have cried "Eureka!" Her classic education having been neglected somewhat, she simply smiled instead and spoke into the silence of her bedroom a triumphant:

"I'll tell the cockeyed world it's a swell plan!"

III

IN all her undertakings, Florette was a most thorough little person. Not for nothing was she known as one of the shrewdest and most cold-bloodedly calculating of the Rialto sorority. And in the carrying out of this latest scheme of hers, she really promised to outdo herself.

As a suitable beginning, she arranged a little party in her own inimitable manner. It was by no means a large affair. Just three persons were invited to the flat: Stuart and Dottie, of course,—and a certain gentleman named Jim Luntan. She had chosen Jim for the very simple reason that he happened to be a particular enemy of Stuart's, both in business and in philandering expeditions.

Florette herself received her guests at the door as they arrived closely following each other. She proved herself to be an amiable and pleasant hostess. The same things,—amiability and pleasantness,—happened to be less true of the two men, however. Though they did shake hands upon encountering each other, the greeting very much resembled the formalities exchanged by two prize-fighters before engaging in battle.

Florette pretended complete ignorance of their strained relations:

"Stuart, darling, do give a hand to poor Jimmie with the cocktails!"

In icy silence the gentlemen disappeared in the kitchen, there to labor with the bottles, oranges, cherries and cracked ice. In the meantime, Florette hurried

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to give Dottie final instructions in the privacy of the bedroom.

"Now, Dot, it's up to you to pull a heavy line on Stuart, while I keep on making him jealous by playing up to Jim. The whole thing depends upon your cleverness."

"Watch me do my stunt, dearie!" promised Dottie, who was all excited at the prospect of capturing Stuart. "You'll kiss me for it yet."

"And I'll also kiss you for getting some money into my hands pretty soon. Don't you forget that fifty-fifty business."

"Trust me!"

In due time the gentlemen were back, still carrying chips on their respective shoulders. Stuart promptly seated himself next to Florette on the couch, while Dottie, according to the first part of the instructions, for the time being snuggled up to Jim Luntan. The glasses were filled again and again, many kisses easing up the monotony of intervals. The lights were low, the room heavy with perfume and appropriately burning incense. The party promised to be a success. Even the two men were beginning to eye each other with tolerant glances.

Those glances, however, soon gave way to murderous ones, for Florette now rose and approached Jim. Giving him an unnecessarily ardent kiss, she said:

"Lemme make a fuss over you, cutie! I'm aching for a little change!"

"Say!" Dottie quickly spoke up, "That's no way to treat me! In a minute I'll vamp Stuart."

"Well, who's stopping you?" Florette shrugged her shoulders depreciatingly. "You can go as far as you like."

Jim was quite willing to accept the change of partners, but Stuart was less inclined to be happy about it. There was nothing he could do, however. And, after all, Dottie was a pretty girl, and a new one. . . . He was resentful, yet not fool enough altogether to pass up

this opportunity to receive kisses from a fresh source. And for a while the new arrangement continued, though it was to be seen that Stuart was singularly unhappy.

Florette was well aware of that. Her plan seemed to be working to perfection! Now for the final blow! She turned to Jim:

"Come, I'll show you the rest of the flat!" With a telling glance at Stuart: "Two is company, you know. . ."

"Damn good company, at that!" said Jim, in complete agreement.

But Stuart rose. He stepped in front of Florette and said most menacingly:

"Now you just cut that out! You stay in this room!"

"Say, dearie," she threw at him, "do you imagine you're giving orders to me?"

"Maybe I am! You stick here!"

"Oh, the hell with you! Come on, Jim!"

Jim Luntten chuckled, put his arm around her waist, and the two of them left the room. It was Dottie's turn to speak up now:

"Ain't that girl the limit? I don't see how you can stand for stuff like that!"

"I'm not going to stand for it!"

"That's the ticket!" She drew him back to the couch again. "There's lots of other girls that are ready to treat you the way you deserve. Here, let me kiss you. . ."

She did kiss him, with all the technique of her years of experience. Next she suggested:

"What's the use of hanging around here? It would be a whole lot cosier for you and me to have a little party of our own in my joint."

Stuart, in his present state of mind, was a ready target for such advances. He did feel like settling the account with Florette, but that might have called for a possible physical encounter with Jim, and fighting was not a speciality of his. Besides, there was a lot to be expected

from a visit to Dottie's place. Hence he said:

"Let's go!"

And they went. Without *adieux* or apologies. Florette was left alone with Jim Luntten, though not for long. She soon developed one of her convenient headaches and curtly informed that gentleman that the party was over. After all, she was expecting a midnight visitor in the person of Bud. .

IV

FLORETTE was not the kind to let grass grow under her feet. For two weeks she thought it advisable to wait, nevertheless, before requesting Dottie to make the first payment. That much time, she knew, was a reasonable period for Dottie's friendship with Stuart to ripen to the remunerative stage. Frequently she encountered the pair together in restaurants and public places. Stuart had never come near Florette since that eventful evening in her apartment. Bud, on the other hand, was a daily visitor.

Everything, therefore, was in tip-top shape,—except for the first installment of the rental Dottie was to pay for Stuart. At the end of the second week Florette called upon the other young lady for a settlement. Dottie received her with open arms, a cordial smile and the usual kiss.

"Well, what have you got for me?" demanded Florette with characteristic directness,

"I guess I can fix you up a nice drink and maybe a couple of sandwiches, too, if you like Swiss cheese."

"Cut out the cheesy comedy. Where is my money?"

"What money?" Dottie wrinkled her forehead. Then she seemed to remember: "Oh, you're talking about the little joke with Stuart——"

"Joke, my eye! I'm here for my fifty percent. Come across!"

"My Gawd! I'd only be too glad to do it, Flo,—but I ain't seen a red cent yet from that guy. He is pretty liberal when it comes to spilling love all over me, but his pockets seem to have Yale locks on them."

Florette's face blanched. She knew the gold-digging methods of Dottie too well to believe this story. And she also knew that it was unlike Stuart to be niggardly. Dottie must be lying, therefore. She must be trying to double-cross her!

"Now, Dot, you don't think I'll let you get away with this hokum, do you? You keep your end of the bargain or I'll——"

Dottie placed an affectionate hand on Florette's shoulder and said soothingly:

"I'm telling you gospel truth, dearie. You don't think I'd cheat you or anything. I aim to get some money from that bird yet, so just have patience for a while."

Realizing that exercising patience was about the only thing left to her, Florette left the apartment. She was convinced that Dottie was planning something unethical and patently dishonest, yet she was compelled to wait.

And in this manner she waited an additional two weeks, at the end of which another interview took place with Dottie. Again that young lady pleaded for more time, claiming that so far she had been unable to "bleed" her victim. Florette was furious, outraged. But she did not tell that to Dottie just yet. She simply said:

"Well, you try your best, Dot! I'm willing to wait a few weeks more."

"You're a peach, kid!"

Florette went home. Her fury was still active, but already her inventive brain was at work on some plan of revenge. It was evident that Dottie had definitely cheated her. She was a low-down crook, that's what! Very well, she would have to suffer for her infidelity.

Getting Stuart back was out of the question, of course. That gentleman was too deeply hurt . . . he'd never consider going back to Florette. Nor did she want him. She wanted only Bud. But why should Dottie get away with murder? Why should she be permitted to enjoy the rights and privileges and gifts that went with Stuart's friendship?

Florette thought long, her desire for revenge actuated by what she considered "Dot's dirty trick." Finally she came to the conclusion that Stuart must be weaned away from the other girl. Weaned away? Broken away, torn away! For that only one method offered. Stuart was notoriously jealous; Florette could still remember that little scene which had terminated her own friendship with Stuart. Well, if jealousy had worked so well once, why shouldn't it work again?

And who so fitted to arouse Stuart's suspicions and mistrust as Bud himself? Now, if she could only contrive means for having Dottie and Bud alone some place and manage to have Stuart discover them. . . . True, it would be dangerous to expose Bud to Dottie's vampish charms! Florette dismissed that particular fear, however, assuring herself that Bud was too deeply in love with her to have eyes for any other woman.

Therefore, Florette made two telephone calls. One was a very friendly one, to Dottie, in which she made no mention at all of financial matters. Rather, she pretended a sudden desire for the other's company, saying:

"I'm awful anxious to have a good talk with you alone, dearie. Just you and me—then later maybe I'll invite a couple of lively fellows to make things hum. Can you come up on Thursday night?"

"Well——" Dottie seemed to hesitate. Then: "I suppose I can come up. Alone, did you say?"

"Sure! Try to shake off Stuart for the evening."

"Why, I haven't seen him for over a week now," was Dottie's surprising answer. "He doesn't come near me these days."

Florette expressed her amazement, but far was she from believing the tale, which she considered just another one of Dottie's lies to get out of paying the stipulated sums.

Her next call was to Bud, whom she invited for the same evening. She added:

"Now, honey, I'm going to have a girl up here and I won't be home when you call. Try to give her a nice time until I arrive—but be good."

Those last words were calculated to stimulate Bud's imagination. Bud hated sermons, and his proud boast was that he was the most wicked lady-killer in seven counties. Yet he answered:

"Trust me to know what to do!"

Florette hung up the receiver and smiled another of her triumphant smiles. The trap was ready! Only Stuart remained now. He would have to be brought to the scene—but there was time for that.

V

THURSDAY evening came and with it Dottie, dolled up in so many new things that Florette was now more than ever convinced that Stuart and his pocketbook were being worked to death. The two girls elaborately kissed each other, then settled down for a bit of gossip. Neither one of them mentioned Stuart.

After a while Florette rose. She apologized to Dottie:

"I have to run down to the store for a couple of things. If either of the men should show up in the meanwhile, entertain him."

"That's my strongest asset, entertaining men."

Florette slipped out. But she went to no stores. Instead, she waited in the

doorway of a neighboring house until she saw Bud turn the corner. She watched him disappear in her own house. All right, now for Stuart!

She hailed a taxi and instructed the driver to take her to Raynor's Madison Avenue residence. On the way, she thought over the final details of the plan. Stuart, of course, would be surprised to see her. She would pretend great sorrow that he had fallen into the hands of such a worthless character as Dottie. Then she would say that she had definite information that the other girl was being unfaithful. If Stuart should ask her how she knew, she would inform him that Dottie had just asked for a loan of her apartment for the purpose of entertaining another man. Stuart would refuse to believe that . . . she would offer to prove it by bringing him to the scene. . . . Then the great climax. . . .

She rang the bell of Stuart's apartment. The broker's man came to the door:

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Raynor is not at home. A young lady called for him some time ago and they went out together." He winked. He and Florette were good friends from the old days. "If you ask me, I think it's a week-end proposition."

Florette stood petrified. A week-end trip—with some girl who was not Dottie? Something was up. She could not understand the situation, but intuitively she knew that Dottie's hand must be present.

"Drive like hell!" she told the driver of the taxi, giving him her address. "I'll pay for damages."

Arriving at her home, she tossed a bill to the man and dashed up the stairs at breakneck speed. Some vague premonition made her pale. All this while Bud had been alone with Dottie—the two of them together in the apartment.

But they were not in the apartment! The place was empty. From the couch,

the disturbed cushions of which plainly showed that its hospitality had been accepted by a petting couple, a note greeted Florette's eyes.

She took the slip of paper. At first she could not read it, her hands shook so with the fury that raged within her. But it had to be read! At any rate, it was brief enough, its short message scribbled in Dottie's untutored hand:

"Dearie:

"It was peachy of you to give me this chance to make up with Buddie. Him and me used to be married—and this was great for both of us to patch up the row. He ain't such a bad kid,—and says I'm an awful relief after some other

girls he has met since. Anyway, we are starting off on another honeymoon.

"Love and kisses!

"Your old pa',

"Dot."

P. S. I'm enclosing a hundred dollars in cash. That ain't exactly fifty-fifty for Stuart Raynor, but I swear I never got a cent from him. How could I? I sold him for a lump sum to Bett Brownlee about a week after I got hold of him. I understand she is gone with Stuart for a week-end now. The money will just keep me and Bud comfortable for some time. How much it was? What would you give to know?

"D."



SAD BUT TRUE

By N. Brewster Morse

Here lies Dorene, once found so fair
In many rounders' eyes;
Her present here much like her past. . . .
She lies and lies and lies

Her hair was Titian in the Spring,
And brown when in the Fall espied,
•While Summer long she was a blonde. . . .
Poor Dorene dyed and dyed and died!



WOMEN ARE ALL ALIKE

By Neil Miller

AM I to be blamed and censored because women are forever falling in love with me? Should I be held responsible for the fact that nature has given me an irresistible influence over the opposite sex? Is it in any way to my discredit that women, one and all, find in me something magnetic, something compelling? No! Rather, I think that I am entitled to the pity and commiseration of the whole world. How can any man be expected to lead a peaceful and respectable married life, when he is forever being pursued by infatuated women?

I do not run after women. It is they who seek me out, and thrust themselves upon me. And they take unreasonable advantage of my sympathetic and generous nature. I will admit that there is a certain weakness in my makeup. Much as I try to resist, there is something within me which renders me powerless in the hands of a pretty woman. It seems that I am too sympathetic and tender-hearted to refuse anything to the poor girls who have had the misfortune to fall in love with me.

So it was with Marie, the girl who did our cooking last winter. She was far above the average servant girl in looks and refinement; but, alas, she fell in love with me! Of course, I am not so lacking in red blood as to be wholly averse to the affection of such a girl as Marie. Indeed, I thrilled to her! There was something of a kindred spirit between us—something which my wife could never understand. Marie was to me as a sudden ray of sunshine is to one who has dwelt too long in darkness.

For many months, we were utterly

happy in our love. And, although there were times when our infatuation for one another almost broke through our self-control, it was a long time before my wife suspected that anything was amiss. But the peace and security with which we carried on our affair made us careless. One morning, my wife chanced to stroll into the kitchen at the very instant that I was planting a farewell kiss upon Marie's moist lips before departing for the office.

She took a most unreasonable viewpoint of the whole affair, and insisted upon discharging Marie immediately. In vain did I remonstrate with her, and plead the cause of the poor girl who was the unfortunate victim of a hopeless infatuation. My wife was obdurate, and that very morning, Marie departed.

To fill the place left vacant by Marie's dismissal, my wife secured the services of an ugly, ungainly creature who answered to the name of Matilda. I swear that I have never seen a less attractive woman in all my life. There was something actually repellant about her visage. Possibly I am too sensitive about such matters, but the presence of such an ugly woman in my household seemed to strike a discordant note.

But my protests to my wife were futile. She insisted that Matilda should remain; and even assured me, in all seriousness, that in time I would become accustomed to her uncouth appearance.

"I can't watch you all the time," she announced. "But I am going to make certain that you carry on no love affairs in our home. I think you will be perfectly safe with Matilda. But, anyway, she is here to stay."

Matilda did stay, and every morning I was forced to face her over the breakfast table as she served my food. What made matters worse was the fact that my wife did not customarily arise until after I had departed for the office. Imagine, if you can, having to eat breakfast every morning with a grinning, smirking, animated gargoyle!

Needless to say, I cut the procedure as short as possible. I would avert my eyes so that I would not have to look at her as she placed my food on the table; and when she had done it, would gulp it down as quickly as possible. Then, seizing my hat, I would dash away for the office. How different from the wonderful mornings Marie and I used to spend together!

Somehow, I managed to endure three months of Matilda; and then came Vivian! Vivian is a second cousin to my wife, and the most wonderful woman in the world. She arrived without warning on a Sunday night, in the midst of a spirited domestic quarrel. My wife and I had spent the entire afternoon and a good proportion of the evening in an altercation involving the family finances, and my wife's extravagance. I had just finished telling her for the tenth time that she did not need and could not have a new fur coat for the winter when the door-bell rang, and Vivian strolled in.

As though by magic, the clouds dispelled at her coming. She was like a beautiful fairy who had but to wave her enchanted wand over our domicile to fill it with sunshine and laughter.

Her hair was long and finely spun. It flashed alternate glints of gold and copper. Her eyes were of azure blue, and sparkled brightly from behind her long, dark lashes with a spirit of eternal mischief. Her mouth held the dewy freshness of a full-blown rose. From the top of her golden head to the heel of her dainty shoe, she was perfection; a symphony of ivory, old rose and gold, of dainty, luscious curves and perfect

proportions. What a delight to be a poet, that one might fittingly describe her beauty! Or an artist, that her wonderful coloring might be shown on canvas. Or a sculptor, that one might properly recreate her beauty in marble for all eternity to gaze upon.

Alas, it is far beyond my meagre ability to even approach a fair description of her! She is, by far, the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen—and I have seen many. It is small wonder that I should have been attracted by her. Despite the fact that most of her conversation was directed at my wife, and most commonplace in nature, she flashed an occasional smile in my direction, which fairly made my head swim.

Next morning at breakfast time, I received a pleasant surprise. As I dashed in for my morning ordeal with Matilda, I was astonished to find that Vivian had already arisen and was waiting for me. The clouds dispersed amazingly before the sunshine of her smile.

"Why so grouchy?" she demanded. "You look like a man going to his doom. And here I lost a good three hours sleep just for the pleasure of taking breakfast with you."

"Forgive me!" I pleaded. "I did not expect to find you here, or I assure you I would have arrived sooner. And as for my being grouchy—well, have you seen Matilda?"

"She has just gone for the coffee," she nodded. "A very capable servant, I should judge?"

"Capable, yes!" I retorted. "But how can you expect any man to be cheerful when he is compelled to encounter a face like that immediately after rising?"

"Then you don't like her?"

"Like her! Why, it is all I can do to tolerate her. Can you imagine taking breakfast every day in the year without a living soul to look at except—Matilda?"

"Frankly, I can't," she replied with a rippling laugh. "And I'll do my very best to help you out. If you find it possible to

look upon me without flinching, I will promise to take breakfast with you every morning for a whole week."

For the first time in many months, I thoroughly enjoyed my morning meal. Vivian turned out to be a wonderful companion. And it was with great regret that I finally arose from the table and prepared to leave the house. Vivian accompanied me as far as the door.

"As a breakfast companion, do you find me satisfactory?" she inquired.

"Perfect!" I exclaimed. "I only wish you could be with us forever."

"And was I sufficiently distracting to keep your mind and eyes off Matilda?"

"Absolutely! For once, I hardly noticed her."

"Then—then, don't you think I should be entitled to a little reward for having saved you?"

I fancied that a daring look came into her eyes as she gazed at me through lowered lashes. Her lips quivered ever so slightly, whether in mischief or emotion, I do not know. Nor did I pause to find out. I am a man who can be tantalized just so far, but no farther.

I seized her madly in my arms and bent her head back. For a moment she lay there, her bosom rising and falling rapidly, her eyes half closed, the long lashes lying on the ivory of her skin. And then, I leaned down and kissed her full upon the lips. Abruptly, she pushed me away.

"Go!" she whispered tremulously.

Somehow, I managed to get through with the day's work, and hastened home with the expectation of a pleasant evening with Vivian. But upon entering the house, I found no one except my wife and—Matilda.

"Where is Vivian?" I asked, striving to appear as unconcerned as possible.

"She's gone out to Hastings' to spend the day," replied my wife carelessly. "She probably won't be home until late to-night, as they intend to go to the Country Club dance."

"Too bad—she'll have to come home alone," I began. "Couldn't we——"

"We could not!" interrupted my wife. "The Hastings will bring her home in their car."

But although I waited up, with a pretense at reading, until twelve o'clock, she had not returned. By that time, my wife was beginning to grow curious over my unwonted studiousness, so I reluctantly turned out the light and went to bed. Sleep came quickly, and I did not waken again until morning. My first thought was of Vivian—had she returned?

But as soon as I reached the bottom of the stairs, my heart gave a leap. I could hear her humming a bit of one of the latest fox-trots. In two steps, I reached the door and flung it open. There, in the streaming sunlight, I saw her.

"Vivian!" I cried joyously.

"Good morning," she replied with a smile. "You are late again, I see. Plainly, promptness is not one of your strong points. Shame on you for having kept me waiting."

I approached her and attempted to take her in my arms. Laughingly, she eluded me, and danced around to the opposite side of the table. Leaning her dainty hands on the back of a chair, she smiled mockingly at me.

"Sit down and be a good boy, if you want me to take breakfast with you," she ordered. "One of the rules of every well-kept household should be, 'No love-making at breakfast time.'"

"But, Vivian," I pleaded, drawing near her again. I almost reached her side.

And then, Matilda came in with the coffee! Confound that woman! With a mocking light in her eyes, Vivian drew out her chair and sat down. There was nothing for me to do but to follow her example. When we had finished she again followed me to the door, and again I kissed her—just once. When I

pleaded for more, she gently pushed me outside and calmly closed the door in my face.

Each day I strove to secure a few moments alone with her, and invariably I met with the same results. Except for our breakfasts together, I never saw her unless my wife was present. I had the unpleasant feeling that Vivian was playing with me, tantalizing me and leading me on—yet always managing to hold me at arms' length.

It was maddening; and I had almost reached the limit of my endurance when Friday morning dawned. I resolved that matters between Vivian and myself must be settled definitely and for all time. I would show her that I am not the sort of man who may be played with with impunity. Thus determined, I went downstairs.

Vivian was waiting. I found her near the window, chattering vivaciously with Matilda. And I could not help marveling at the contrast between the two. Surely, Mother Nature must have been in a whimsical mood when she created this pair. Possibly, she wished to show the extremes of which she is capable. The ridiculous and the sublime, as it were.

"Ah, there you are," greeted Vivian, coming toward me with her dazzling smile. Matilda vanished abruptly at sight of me.

"Matilda and I have just been discussing you," announced Vivian. "She agrees with me that you are the most wonderful man in the world; and that your wife is the most fortunate woman."

"I care absolutely nothing for Matilda's opinion of me," I told her. "I don't even care to discuss her."

"You don't know what you're missing," said Vivian. "Why, the girl worships you—think of that! Why, it is the opportunity of a lifetime! What a wonderful affair it might be! Love! Romance! Passion——"

"Ugh!" I interrupted. "Please say

no more about it. The woman nauseates me! I can't bear the thoughts of her.

"And she is absolutely crazy about you—told me so herself. You should not be so blind to——"

In exasperation, I laid down my napkin and went around to her side of the table. Taking both of her hands in mine, I turned her about so that she faced me. Almost instantly, the mischievous look vanished from her eyes, and she glanced up at me with an apologetic smile.

"Forgive me," she said softly. "Somehow, I just can't help teasing you. You always take everything so seriously."

"I am taking *you* seriously," I told her. "Vivian, dear, I want you—I must have you—I——"

"Sh-h," she admonished, her cool fingers on my lips. "Matilda will be back in a moment. Go and sit down like a good boy, and I'll tell you something nice."

Reluctantly, I obeyed her and waited impatiently while Matilda served the coffee. When she had left the room, I glanced up questioningly.

"Well?" I suggested.

Vivian ceased stirring her coffee, and glanced shyly across the table at me.

"I was just thinking about something your wife told me last night," she said quietly. "It seems that she has an engagement to play bridge this afternoon. She invited me to accompany her, but, as I care nothing for the game, I pleaded a previous engagement. Besides, it's Matilda's afternoon off, and I was just thinking——"

"Vivian!" I cried. "You're wonderful! Shall we say at three o'clock?"

"Three will be perfectly satisfactory," she assented softly.

Needless to say, I was all atremble with suppressed excitement when, at three o'clock that afternoon, I stole home and dashed into the house. Everything was quiet—so quiet, in fact, that at first I feared Vivian had failed me.

For a moment, I was stunned with disappointment. And then, I saw her.

She was all curled up in a big chair, like a tired kitten who has gone to sleep. She raised her head quickly at my approach, and I thought I noticed a suspicious redness about her eyes.

"Why, Vivian!" I exclaimed. "What is the matter, dear?"

Her only answer was to bury her face in her tiny hands and sob softly and brokenly. It was some little time before I could get her to tell me about it. At last, however, she raised her head. And bit by bit, I got the story from her.

"It—it's my brother, Fred," she explained brokenly. "He's done something—I don't know what. Anyway, there's some money missing, and they think Fred took it. I received a telegram from him to-day. He's under arrest, and unless the money is repaid, he must stand trial and possibly go to the penitentiary—oh, it is terrible!"

"But why don't you pay back the money, if that would end the thing?" I suggested.

"Oh, don't you understand?" she sobbed. "Fred hasn't got it, and neither have I. I came to the city with exactly five hundred dollars, intending to buy myself some clothes. Most of that has been spent—but even if I had it all, it wouldn't be enough."

By much pleading and coaxing, I persuaded her to tell me the whole story. After all, it was a very small matter. It appeared that her brother's shortage did not exceed one thousand dollars. Gently, I patted her shoulder in an attempt to soothe and comfort her.

"There, there, little girl," I said tenderly. "It will be all right. I shall be more than delighted to let you have any amount of money you may need."

"Oh, I couldn't think of that!" she exclaimed. "I couldn't allow you to give me money—what must you think of me—telling you all my troubles like this? No, I couldn't take your money—there

must be some other way out. You are offering it to me merely because I am a relative of your wife's and you think it's your duty."

"Nonsense! I am offering it, Vivian, I am offering it because I love you—I have loved you since the first moment I saw you. Now that you are in need, the truth must come out. I insist that you allow me to help you; because, dear—I love you."

For a moment, she stared at me in mingled surprise and unbelief.

"You—you are in love with me?" she repeated blankly.

"Believe me, I am speaking in all earnestness and sincerity. I love you madly—devotedly—passionately!"

She stared in unbelief through her moist lashes. Then a faint, pathetic little smile rippled over her face. She dabbled her eyes with a wisp of a handkerchief and smiled up at me, like the sun coming out after a rain.

"You must forgive me," she pleaded. "You see, this telegram, and everything coming at once, has upset me to an unusual degree. I am hardly myself. And then, when you declared that you loved me—something just had to break loose. You see—I—I thought I was the only one who cared."

"Vivian!" I cried passionately.

"Not now, please!" she pleaded. "I have Fred to think of, now. We must get him out of this terrible mess at once. Afterward—well, there is your wife. Much as I think of you, I must not allow my presence here to make trouble between you and your wife. No matter what happens, I don't want her to be hurt— Oh, I know I am raving like a maniac—but all the worry about the money——"

"Now, that is all settled," I told her tenderly. "Here, I will write you a check at once."

"I—don't you think cash would be better?" she objected. "A check is so liable to lead to complications."

"Of course," I agreed. "Unfortunately, it is too late for me to secure that much money to-day; but I'll bring it to-morrow, if that will be soon enough."

"It'll be just dandy! You're a dear to be so generous with me—I don't see how I can ever repay you."

Her tears had vanished for good and all. Once more, she smiled tantalizingly into my eyes.

"Promise me," I whispered, "that I shall have more than one stinky little kiss which you gave me at breakfast time. May I not hope for two or three—or possibly more?"

She hung her head shyly, and a gentle flush stole over her cheeks.

"You—I'm so fond of you, and you've been so good to me—I hardly see how I can refuse——"

And then the sudden blast of an automobile horn outside recalled to me the fact that somehow the afternoon had passed, and that my wife had returned. I hastily donned my hat and coat and left the house. When I reëntered a few minutes later, my wife met me in the hall with her customary kiss, while, over her shoulder, I exchanged winks with Vivian. Her smile was so tantalizing that I put more emphasis than necessary into the kiss I gave my wife.

Although Vivian failed to meet me at breakfast the next morning, I carried out my promise in regard to the money. When I went home Saturday evening, I carried the necessary thousand dollars and, in addition, a personal gift for Vivian of five hundred.

When I arrived at home, I found that preparations were under way for a small farewell party in Vivian's honor. It was not a pretentious affair, as only five or six couples had been invited. Yet, small as it was, the presence of so many additional people in the house rendered it difficult for me to speak privately with Vivian.

It was not until nine-thirty, while we were dancing together, that I found an

opportunity to whisper a few words in her ear. When the dance had finished, I strolled carelessly out of the room and upstairs. In a moment, Vivian joined me, flushed, laughing, and infinitely more desirable than ever before.

I shall never forget the look of inexpressible gratitude which passed over her face as I handed her the bundle of bills. She passed hastily into her room to hide them. And almost instantly, she was back in the hall.

"How can I ever thank you?" she whispered tremulously.

For a moment, her beautiful eyes burned into mine. Then, her bare white arms reached outward and upward. They encircled my neck and drew me to her. For one brief instant, her lips burned against mine. Then, at the sound of someone ascending the stairs, she broke away.

"The summer house at eleven," came in a barely audible whisper. She was gone. A subile perfume lingered to haunt me.

Fortunately, none of our guests keep late hours. By ten-thirty, the last of them had departed, and shortly after the house was left in utter darkness. The moon was shining brightly as I stepped out into the yard and made my way to the summer house. Inside that vine-covered retreat it was quite dark—an ideal spot for lovers' meetings. A glance at my watch showed me that it still lacked a few minutes of eleven. Impatiently, I lighted a cigarette and went inside to wait.

How long I sat there, I do not know. My thoughts were pleasant ones, and the silence and beauty of the moonlight highly conducive to dreaming. Somehow—I know not the manner of her coming—she was there, beside me in the darkness.

"You—you are here?" she whispered softly.

"I am here, sweetheart," I assured her. "To-night is *our* night—our night for

distraction—for madness. It was made purposely for you and me—nothing else matters.”

“Nothing else matters,” she repeated. And our lips met in the darkness.

For a long time we were silent, too filled with emotion for words. She was the first to speak, and her words held her typical drollery.

“I wonder why we never had a night like this before.”

“It is about time you were waking up to the possibilities of life,” I told her. And then, from sheer delight, I leaned forward and gently bit her on the neck.

“Oh, you brute!” she exclaimed in in mock severity. “That will leave a mark on my neck like a daub of fresh, red paint.”

“What does it matter?” I inquired.

“It doesn’t—not in the least,” she whispered, raising her lips to mine.

Time flew by as on wings. The customary noises of the night gradually died away. At last the moon, weary of its long vigil, sank to rest. She stirred gently in my arms.

“What time is it, dearest?” she asked.

A glance at my watch showed that it was three o’clock! In another hour, dawn would come. Reluctantly, we rose and made our way through the darkness to the house. There was a brief, hurried little kiss at the door, and she scurried away. In a few minutes I followed her, going directly to my room and tumbling into bed. I was asleep instantly.

When I opened my eyes the bright light of day was streaming in through my window, and a pang of regret was in my heart. To-day, Vivian, whose kisses still haunted me, would be leaving us—possibly forever. Anxious to be with her as long as possible, I dressed hastily and went downstairs. But there, I paused in dismay. My wife was seated at the table—alone!

“Good morning, dear,” said she.

“Where’s Vivian?” I demanded, a terrible fear in my heart.

“Gone! She’s been gone for hours. Left at eight o’clock, in a taxi. I wanted to wake you up and have you drive her down to the train; but she wouldn’t hear of it. Said you needed the sleep. She made me promise to give you her love.”

“Oh, well,” I sighed philosophically. “I’m sorry that I missed her, though. I really was quite fond of Vivian.”

“So I noticed,” retorted my wife dryly. “Oh, by the way,” she added hastily. “I want to thank you for the wonderful surprise you gave me. I was so afraid that you had forgotten the new fur coat I wanted this winter. It was wonderful of you.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded in bewilderment.

“Oh, don’t pretend innocence,” she chided. “You are a very poor actor. Of course, you haven’t the slightest recollection of placing a certain envelope on my dresser, in which was seven hundred and fifty dollars. You’ve forgotten it already, haven’t you?”

I could only stare at her in amazement.

“Vivian and I spent a good proportion of the night in talking about what a wonderful and considerate husband you are,” she continued. “You know, Vivian insisted upon sleeping with me on account of it being her last night here and having so many things to talk over.”

And then Matilda brought in the coffee. Her entrance undoubtedly saved me from making a fool of myself.

“Vivian says she is going to get herself a new coat—though where she will get the money is more than I can—What on earth are you staring at?”

It is quite probable that I was staring. Matilda was serving the coffee. From behind my wife’s back, she smirked disgustingly at me, and when she saw that she had my eye, she winked brazenly. And on her neck was a mark—a mark like a daub of fresh red paint!

Oh, Lord, how I dread going down to breakfast in the morning!

CAP AND BELLS

By Edith Lyle Ragsdale

AS the shrill blast of the postman's whistle cut the calm of the morning air Alice jumped up and ran, yes, actually ran, to the door. I have chided the dear girl repeatedly anent her hoidenish ways but, "as the twig is bent," you know; and a matronly decorum certainly seems to hold no appeal for her. This deplorable attitude of my wife has always been a severe cross for me, and to obliterate the fault I have, from our nuptial night, exercised no small degree of disciplinary repression with, I am grieved to admit, only varying success.

As the coffee-cups settled back and the silver ceased jangling, Alice came fox-trotting back into the breakfast room, a sheaf of letters, magazines and circulars clutched in her hand, and, horrible to narrate, a shred of grape-fruit dangling from her scarlet lips!

She collided with her chair and flopped—"flopped" is the word—into her seat.

Again, as on her tempestuous exit of a minute before, I salvaged the table by heroically laying hold of it and, though my brow contracted with agony at the palpable evidence of her grossly flagrant conduct, I compressed my lips and waited in pained silence for her rapid-fire comments on the morning's mail.

With a flirt she tossed my correspondence across the table, where it promptly came to rest on my coddled eggs, and without even a word of apology, began absorbing her half-dozen or more letters, invitations and notes.

With dignity I picked up my letters, which were mostly bills, and in a frigid tone spoke:

"Alice——" I began, intending to check, if possible, once and for all, her utter disregard of the reverence and respect which I feel to be my due, "Alice, I feel——"

"M—mmmm," my wife irrelevantly interrupted as she, with the butter knife slit the last envelope, a thin, dyspeptic-looking, greenish affair. "Here's an invitation to Giddy Dane's lawn fête. M—mmm!" She sighed rapturously, and added: "It's to be a fancy dress party."

Despite my clouded brow, Alice smiled sweetly and avalanched the card across the board. This time, being prepared, I grabbed the thing before it made a too close acquaintance with my food.

Adjusting my eyeglasses, I scanned the invitation. In heavy old English type the purple letters stood blatantly out on the mellon-green of the heavy, disgustingly scented paper. Holding it at some distance from my eyes—which, despite the most perfect lenses, seem to grow weaker all the time—I gathered, from my perusal of the idiotic affair, that on a certain night there was to be a party, of the garden variety, to which Alice and I were invited. Further, we were to make nincompoops of ourselves by rigging out in the regalia of some fool or other, in fact, to be specific, to come masked!

And I occupying a chair in—well—the college is too dear to me to have its venerable name linked with such outrageous — um — er — harebrained escapades!

Therefore, in scathing terms I explained to Alice my utter repugnance to such affairs but, at the end of a heated

fifteen minutes, heated on my part at least, I perceived that Alice was paying scant heed to my remarks. Therefore, in dignified aloofness, I finished my meal.

Alice, though one of the dearest girls in the world, at time gets on my nerves. There is a lamentable disparity in our ages and, from my angle of discernment, I feel that a man of my years, a professor in one of the foremost colleges in America, as I before remarked, would be, to use all charity, demeaning himself, lowering his dignity, as it were, to aid and abet, much less join in with, the senseless pranks of the young fools who, before our marriage formed Alice's associates and whom, despite my most sincere efforts, I cannot, to descend to a vulgar colloquialism, "pry her loose from."

As I set my coffee-cup down, I stole a look across the big bowl of lilacs at my wife. She is pretty, and, I fear, realizes it, though I have spared no pains to repress all such frivolous ideas. As I regarded her from the tail of my eye I had to admit that, in a *petite*, brown way she was even more than pretty as, with finger to lip, she sat thinking.

I folded my napkin and rose. Alice spoke:

"I believe I'll go as Queen Elizabeth," she murmured. "I've an idea I'd make a wonderful queen." She spoke for all the world as though I, instead of expending a quarter of an hour denouncing the masked fête, had heartily indorsed it!

With averted head I brushed past my wife and, as a well-merited punishment, omitted my morning kiss. Alice's voice trailed sweetly down the hall:

"What are you going to wear?" she called.

I snorted. The effrontery of the girl! She knew well enough I would not go. With a slam I closed the door and hurried down the tree-lined street. I was late because of my verbal tilt with Alice, and very much disgruntled.

As the day advanced I sensed a growing abstraction. For no apparent reason I began experiencing a desire to—again dipping into the crude vernacular of the street—"put one over on Alice!" A unique idea formed in my scholastic mind. I would—unknown to my wife—attend the fête. I would, I felt quite sure, be able to pick my wife from a score of Elizabeths. Certainly the advantage was with me. I knew what character she would present. She believing—and rightly—that I hated such asinine shindys would never suspect me.

Deep down in my heart I wanted to satisfy my mind on one point, that is, whether or not Alice really loved me, and was not, to again resort to the vulgar, "jazzing around." At times I had felt a disquieting doubt. Sometimes, after a somewhat severe curbing of my wife's emotional impetuosity, I had discovered a peculiar look in her eyes. But, being a man of cool and calculating nature, it offended my sense of decency to see a woman so—er—emotional.

At the end of classes I walked down town to a costumer's. At first I thought to go as a monk. The habiliments of a friar intrigued me. But, on mature thought, I decided that, were Alice to suspect a change of front on my part, she would certainly look for me as a priest. The idea that I could—as it were—don cap and bells, would never enter her head.

From the heterogeneous array of costumes I selected a dazzling creation of red velvet and gold lace, the regalia of a Mexican *matador*, gorgeous in spangles and flowing silken sash. At first my mind revolted at the thought of a professor of—but never mind! I curbed my revolt and, paying a deposit on the costume, turned homeward.

The night, a wonderful, exotic night in midsummer, dropped softly dark. The sky, like a vault of shimmering black velvet, diamond-studded, arched overhead. There was a subtle touch of

witchery about, a promise of adventure whispering on the breeze. Catching the infection, my nerves tingled and a zest, foreign to my usual scholarly calm, permeated me.

I phoned Alice that I was attending a lecture and would not be home until late, dined downtown, afterwards going to the costumer's from whom I had rented my mask.

As the valet deftly tied the soft, silken sash about my waist, I glanced in the full-length mirror and, though I have always repressed any tendency toward vanity which seemed about to crop out in Alice, I could not down the glow of admiration my reflected image called into being. There was no denying it, I was an ideal *matador*. In the delightful experience of contemplating my nicely-turned calves, in parading back and forth to get the full effect of the rich velvets, I almost forgot the time. However, as the chiming of the clock struck on my trained ear, I hastened to throw the encircling black cloak about my shoulders, and with the aplomb of a king entered my taxi.

As the chauffeur stopped in front of the ornate gate of the Dane estate I stepped out, paid the extortionate fare and, with a sensation of lightness pervading me, walked through the festooned arch.

The affair was in full swing. And, even though I have always opposed such uncouth displays, I had to admit that the scene was enchanting. The festivities were being held on the lawn and in the private park just beyond. There was a huge marquee, with sides removed, in which refreshments were being served. I caught fleeting glimpses of tempting viands, mounds of cream, long, frosted glasses of *frappé* and (whisper it) suggestive bottles packed in ice!

There were rustic seats, swings, hammocks and the like scattered around. Electric lights, masquerading as gaily-colored flowers, were strung about, vy-

ing with the soft glow of numberless Chinese lanterns, which intensified the gloom beyond.

And everywhere, there were gnomes, fairies, brigands, monks, kings, queens, Columbines, Beauty and the Beast, grotesque animals, dainty flower girls.

A huge platform had been erected, planed, waxed to ice-smoothness, and across its polished surface every manner of mask swung giddily. The dancing and laughter, the unabashed and bold flirtations, the zest of the pleasure-mad crowd got beneath my skin, awoke deep down in my subconscious mind some long-dormant streak of evil, the heritage, no doubt, of some roistering ancestor, who, for the time being, routed the conscious "I" and, with the flippancy of an addleheaded dare-devil, shoved my all-too-willing body into the maelstrom of temptation.

Circling the dancing pavilion, I began to look for Alice. I expected to find her in the midst of the wildest revels but, though I scanned several queens, I felt quite certain my wife was not of the number. Sauntering about, sword in hand, I began peering into secluded spots, but no frolicsome Elizabeth rewarded my search.

Widening the circle I began, quite shamelessly, ogling the occupants of the swings, half-hidden benches, etc. Passing quite near a hammock I thought I caught the sound of a subdued moan. I paused, listening. Again I caught a snuffle. Crossing over to the woman I spoke, quite guardedly, I assure you. As she raised her head I smiled. It was a very much be-ruffed queen. Alice, I knew.

But I was wary. She had defied me and come to the masque, and if she wasn't enjoying herself, it was—some way my unknown ego seemed to put strange words in my mind—"up to her."

I was ripe for—anything. My years as a staid professor had fallen from me with the habiliments of my everyday

life. And, with the donning of the *matador's* costume, a spirit of adventure had seized me.

Bowing in mock homage, I "craved" the reason of the queen's distress. As I did, the "spigot" popped out and the fermented troubles of "her Majesty" literally effervesced all over me. To make a rather long story short, I learned, between sniffs, that her husband—which was I—was a befuddled old fossil, a cantankerous old fool who didn't have enough red blood in his whole body to give a flea a bath, who, because he didn't like a good time himself, never allowed her one, who didn't care if her heart broke from loneliness, who didn't want her to go places with the "bunch" nor dance, nor, nor nothing! (Alice's rendition of English!)

I certainly got a new slant on my character that night.

From the muffled depths of her handkerchief "Elizabeth" poured out her wrongs in a torrent. And, before the verbal deluge, I was swept off my feet. In a good deal less than nothing flat, I was made to understand I was many and varied kinds of a certain long-eared animal, whose chief characteristic is his bray!

I grew angry. I had not intended misusing Alice. I resented such a combing. I—that is, my subliminal ego,—rapped to it that my wife was giving me a raw deal. It was more than adequate. It was lewd.

This form of speech may be considered the antithesis of language becoming a professor with the hard-earned letters, M.A., LL.D., following his name. But I was *not* Professor Elliott. I was a Mexican *matador*, and the language while crude, expresses precisely my state of mind during that never-to-be-forgotten period, as "Queen Elizabeth" sat huddled in the hammock berating, like a common fish-wife, my well-meant and glaringly futile efforts at disciplining her.

There was just one sensation para-

mount within my breast. I wanted to fall upon her, as the veriest cave-man might, and pummel her into submission! However, even as the desire formulated itself, the woman tumbled out of the hammock.

"I'm going home!" she cried in sepulchral tones. "Damn a man who hasn't the pep of an angle worm!" She was gone!

I stood perfectly still where she had left me. I was mad, clean through! I almost hated myself for standing there and letting Alice get away with it. She had showed me up in an unthinkable light. Some of her illuminating epithets were: house-cat, granny, spineless molly-coddle!

I imagined Alice had penetrated my disguise and had taken the occasion to let me know what she really thought of me. She had deliberately hurt me. Had aired her contempt for a "damned man who sported less pep than an angle worm!" Think of it! An angle worm, that lowest of all low creatures! And I a M.A., LL.D.!

Well— I grew tense. I decided to show my estimable lady that I had a little stiffening in my backbone.

I knew she would expect me to follow her home, perhaps patch up a truce. Instead, I turned resolutely back to the scene of the wildest revelry. As I swaggered along, a Spanish dancing girl, twanging the strings of a tiny guitar, came dancing toward me. She was divinely formed, *petite*, young and so riotously alive, so filled with abounding animal magnetism that, as she touched me, an answering thrill, similar to that experienced when one comes in contact with an electrical current, swept through me.

Dancing about me she corded a pathetic love-song, something which I could not catch, but infinitely appealing, all the time tempting me with the sinuous, sensuous grace of her body.

Ages seemed to roll back. An eon

of time fell away and I was just a man, primitive, filled with desire for the alluring creature whose costume, instead of concealing her rounded busts and sculptured limbs, merely served to accentuate them.

The Hawaiian musicians, hidden behind a screen of shrubbery, suddenly struck up. As the seductive strains throbbed and billowed about us, I forgot all that I had ever been, toilsome years of study, academic honors dissolved like mist, my marriage vows, the fact that I was considered one of the few real scholars in my line became as nothing. With a clamoring hunger that refused to be crushed, I caught the provocative creature to me, kissed the alluring dimple in her chin and, hardly realizing what I was doing, swung her out onto the glassy floor and joined, whole-heartedly, in the, to put it mildly, suggestive dance.

Suddenly the music ceased. Still laboring beneath the spell of the mystic night I—staid professor of years' standing though I am—picked the girl up in my arms and, lips on hers, carried her into the dense shadow of a honeysuckle hedge!

My pulses were throbbing! My blood, usually so cool, surged like molten fire through my veins! I was mad, mad with desire such as I had never in all my life experienced.

And, unbelievable as it may seem, I enjoyed the sensation.

I pulled the girl's head down on my shoulder. I pressed kisses, hot as fire, on the responsive lips. I was bewitched, wildly infatuated by the slip of a creature nestling in my arms.

In the dew-cooled darkness I held her to me and kissed her—hundreds of times. And she—well—there was an abandon, a more than ordinary willingness to give prodigally of her sweets, which swept me along on the floodtide of passion as recklessly as a chip is carried down-stream in a spring freshet. Some way, without saying a word, the Spanish

dancer seemed to convey to me all, and more, than Alice had, anent repression. Without a word I knew the girl in my arms was being driven to desperation by the repression of her vivid, beautiful nature. I sensed, perfectly, the lack in her life. I understood, psychically, perhaps, that though this girl might be, perhaps was, married, her husband, acting along a perfectly well-meaning, but absolutely faulty theory, was crushing back into her own consciousness her spontaneous, God-implemented desires.

It is just possible Alice's arraignment had served to tear the scales from my eyes. Anyway, I understood.

When I married Alice, I loved her. In a perfectly proper, calm manner. And she had been wild about me. But I, because I deemed it unladylike—low, if you please,—had curbed her demonstrations. She, as a result, had become prudish. Her kisses, rare as perfection, were cold and eminently proper. She was, so far as our connubial life went, perfection—if ice may be called perfect. And, so far as a man may emulate a woman, I was Alice's duplicate.

But the girl in my arms was temperamental. She, differently situated, could easily have been a courtesan. She had the power to make a man feel. To forget everything but—her. Her kisses burned—burned. I could feel her body quiver against mine. The natural desire of the moment shook her as the wind shakes a tree. She was passion personified.

And I, with every fiber of my body, with all the heretofore undreamed-of fires of my volcanic nature, responded.

I forgot Alice—the prude. In the hour I held the girl in my arms I lived through an eternity of emotion. I was shaken to the centre of my being. I—who had been but little better than a dead man—was now radiantly alive, thrilling with unsuspected potentialities.

By chance, I had found the other half of my soul.

To few are given the agony, the supreme joy of that hour. The voluptuous seductiveness of the girl sent my senses reeling. Her hot little mouth pressed rapturously to mine was a million times more intoxicating than the fabled wine of the gods. She seemed a glowing, rosy ember of love, fanned into a passionate flame by the perfumed wind of desire.

All about eddied the sobbing, tinkling melody of the Hawaiians. Laughter floated to us. At times a couple, intent on a secluded nook in which to pledge their love, passed us, arms entwined, lips meeting amorously. But we were secure. Hidden beneath the over-arching branches of the huge, white-flowered bushes, we were perfectly screened.

Somewhere in a tree a night bird sang. A glow-worm, tempting her lover, flung out her star-like beacon. The perfume from a million dew-drenched flowers cloyed the air. It was a mad, passionate night, a night filled with temptations.

After a while—I cannot tell whether it was a moment or an hour—we went back to the dancers. At a safe distance from the crowd I caught her to me, kissed her— Then we separated.

Filled with a nameless unrest, I turned back toward the honeysuckle hedge. Smoking, I tried to still the tumult of my mind. But I could not.

The memory of the girl's kisses sent burning darts of ecstasy through me. I tossed the half-smoked cigar into a murky pool and retraced my steps. I was wild, beside myself, to find the Spanish dancer, if needs be, to compel her to remove the tantalizing black lace mantilla, to tell me her name. For, in my soul, I had determined to—some way or another—have her for my own.

Pushing through the crowd that fringed the dancing pavilion I caught sight of a flowing black lace scarf. Forgetting dignity, I rudely pushed and shoved until I reached her side. Drawing her to me I began a hurried, incoherent declaration of my desires. I do

not know what I said, but something, some impulsive, mad thing filled with the intensity of my newly-awakened love, sent to my lips by the sub-conscious "I" that had driven, lashed me into frenzied, mad moods from the time I threw off my gray business suit and substituted the gaudy garments of the bull-fighter.

The girl threw back her head and laughed lightly, catching my arm. But if the laugh chilled me the touch of the fat, white fingers nauseated me! It was a Spanish dancer, all right, but not my vivid, fiery inamorata of the honeysuckles. There was a vague familiarity in the laugh, the easy freedom of a liaison in the way in which the woman leaned against me, a vulgar commonness antipodal to the girl I had become mad about.

The dance was forming and, much to my disgust, I had to hold the girl in my arms, listen to her insipid inanities, her veiled suggestions.

Suddenly my heart skipped a beat. I stopped and looked about me, rubbed my eyes. I was not "seeing things." It was no hallucination. On the floor, gliding lightly about were three more Spanish dancers, all alike as the proverbial "peas in the pod!"

My head swam. I felt physically ill. I could not go on fox-trotting. But though I explained my sudden indisposition to my partner, she would not leave me. I endeavored to rid myself of her detestable presence, but with Spartan-like fortitude she clung to me.

But fate was kind. A scowling South Sea Islander snatched her, resisting strenuously, and whirled her again onto the floor, freeing me to continue my search for my charmer.

But the delay had been fatal to my hopes. When I again sought the spot where I had last seen the three mantilla-veiled dancers, one had disappeared.

Successively I engaged the others, in conversation. But disappointment met

me. She of the ardent soul was gone.

I hunted for hours. But my lady of the honeysuckles had vanished. As the stars paled and the night grew chill I—with agony in my heart—gave up, retrieved my sedate, every-day apparel and went home.

Guiltily I slipped up the stairs and on tiptoe entered our room. I—now that it was all over, began to experience certain conscientious qualms. But though I exercised admirable caution, Alice heard me and called:

"Getting in, dear?"

I growled a sour reply. Queen Elizabeth's tirade still rankled.

I switched on the light and, as the rosy glow filled the room, I involuntarily looked at my wife. She was lying, haloed head propped on one bare, brown arm, a light, such as I had never seen,

mirrored in her eyes, a happy, curving smile picking out the dimples in her cheeks. I caught my breath sharply.

"Did Queen Elizabeth enjoy her reign?" I asked maliciously.

Alice laughed happily. "I don't know. You see I—at the last minute—changed costumes with Agnes Ritz. Her husband is such an unspeakable old bum! She decided to fool him."

"You were not—Elizabeth?" I gasped weakly.

"Oh, no! I went as a Spanish dancer—see—there is my costume on that chair."

I turned, took one look and snapped out the light. I didn't speak. There was both too much and too little to say.

Caught in the meshes of the black lace mantilla a vagrant spray of honeysuckle lay dying!



LIFE IS LIKE THAT

By Ella Martin

The girl who loved *him* was short and dark,
The one *he* loved was fair and slim,
And yearned for a man who loved her not,
While the dark girl dreamed only of him.

He married a woman who jollied him
Into forgetting the fair and tall;
But *she* thought only of frivolous things,
And loved his pocket-book most of all.



LED ASTRAY—THANK GOODNESS

By Gilbert K. Griffiths

IN these days of movies, jazz and necking parties, it may not be easy to believe that a good-looking young man, aged twenty-two, with blond curly hair and blue eyes, could have been as unfamiliar with the fair sex as was Louis Kennedy. He had never kissed or been out with any girl, except one. He hadn't even kissed that one, unless you count a few hurried platonic pecks on her cheeks, and once or twice on her lips, as kisses.

It was about eleven p.m. when Louis descended from the street-car and wearily trudged the half-block to Mrs. Brophy's respectable rooming-house in the east thirties—east of Lexington Avenue.

It was not so much that he was tired, as that he had a feeling of depression. He was returning from a week-end visit to his home-town in New England. Louis had been making these trips regularly every three or four weeks, partly to see his father and brother, but principally to see Doris Henderson. Since before he first came to New York, about two years before, he had been "practically" engaged to Doris. The basis of their relationship had preserved its "*status quo*" ever since.

That was just the trouble. Encouraged somewhat by the tone of her recent letters, he had hoped to bring matters to a head on this trip and get her to "name the day." He had risen rapidly in the advertising office where he worked and, being an optimist, felt that he could afford to support a wife.

"Do you love me as much as ever?" he had asked. "Oh,—er—yes,—I suppose so," had been her unenthusiastic reply.

"Well, when are you going to marry me?" he had continued.

"Oh, some day, perhaps."

He had tried to make her give him a more definite answer, but she had become bored with his questioning, and finally they had had a "tiff."

As he climbed the stairs at Mrs. Brophy's towards his small room on the top floor, he saw, through the smoked-glass transom, that there was a light in Jim Haslett's room—the room next to his.

"Ah, that is good," he thought. "Jim is in, and is still up. I will go in and chat with him for a while." Having occupied an adjacent room for over a year, he had struck up a close friendship with Jim, who could always be relied upon to cheer him up.

Upon reaching Jim's room, he deposited his bag on the landing and, as was his custom, burst into the room without knocking. Not seeing Jim either in his bed or in his favorite arm-chair, he went further into the room and then, in a tiny alcove which served as wash-room, he saw a vision which made him catch his breath, and sent the blood running to his Puritan cheeks.

Imagine a smaller, less heavy and younger edition of the Venus de Milo come to life. Add bobbed, auburn hair, a velvet, milk-white skin, that even a jaded connoisseur would love to touch, and you will have some faint idea of the cause of Louis' blushes.

The back of this lovely creature, at the moment that he first glimpsed her, was turned towards Louis; and it should be stated that she was not entirely devoid of clothing. Black silk stockings, rolled below the knee, served to accentu-

ate the beauty of trim ankles and the graceful curve of finely-modelled calves; her tiny feet were encased in patent-leather shoes with high heels. Above the roll of her stockings, a generous allowance of bare and delightfully tapering thighs was visible, until a further appraisal of her charms was hampered, but not rendered entirely impossible, by a diaphanous pink garment, which Louis, having read the newspaper advertisements, would have told you was a camisole. She was reaching with both hands for a jar of beauty cream from a shelf which was rather high up. This attitude of reaching, as perhaps you know, detracts not at all from the charm of a woman's figure.

"Put it down there, please, Mrs. Brophy," she requested, and, having succeeded in reaching the jar, she turned full around towards Louis. The front elevation of her charms fully bore out the promise of the rear view, but Louis' appreciation of this fact, together with any exclamation of surprise or indignation which she might have uttered upon seeing Louis, was suddenly cut short by the intervention of Napoleon. Now Napoleon, as Louis learned later, was the name of a wretched little chow, whose only claim to fame or greatness, apart from his name, lay in the fact that he was the property of the fair vision above mentioned. Napoleon had been having a nice nap on a pillow in the best easy-chair, and he resented the interruption of his slumbers, caused by the sudden entrance of Louis, to whom he had not been properly introduced. He made, therefore, a violent dash for this gentleman, and attempted to make a meal of his ankle.

The fair vision immediately rushed to Louis' assistance, and having quickly disengaged the chow's teeth from his flesh, she securely tethered the animal to the bedpost. Louis placed his foot on a chair, and the fair one solicitously assisted in a hurried examination of

his ankle, which revealed no further damage than a few tooth-marks. To be on the safe side, however, she insisted that a little tincture of iodine, of which she happened to possess a bottle, would be a good prophylactic.

The pain having quickly subsided, Louis had another opportunity to study her charms, while she bent over his ankle and tenderly applied the iodine. He glimpsed quite enough of two gleaming white breasts to feel certain that they were small, firm and beautifully rounded, and to entirely overcome any scruples which he had about looking at her.

The application finished, she suddenly remembered her state of undress, and almost yelled at him:

"Get out! Get out! How dare you come into my room!" Louis beat a hasty retreat, without waiting to reply to this embarrassing question. Arrived in his own room he found a note from Jim saying that his firm had suddenly ordered him to their Chicago office and, as he would probably be gone for two or three months, he had decided to give up his room.

"So that," thought Louis, "accounts for the horrible blunder that I have just made."

He wrote a note of abject apology to the fair vision, enclosing Jim's note in substantiation of his excuse, and slipped it under her door. That done, he decided he would never, never see her, speak to her, or think of her again.

But resolutions are easier to make than to keep, and Louis passed an almost sleepless night, torn by the well-known conflicting emotions. The strict puritanical atmosphere in which he had been brought up, coupled with the Scotch blood which came to him through his father, told him that he must see her no more; that he had done a very wicked thing in even gazing upon the lady. He should have shut his eyes. Besides, wasn't he "practically" engaged to Doris? On the other hand, though, the warm

Gallic blood in his French mother, who had died when he was still a baby, urged his thoughts in another direction. For the first time in his life, this side of his nature had been fully aroused by the beautiful vision he had seen, and it threatened to obtain the mastery over his principles.

Of course, Louis had seen statues and paintings of nude ladies in museums and art galleries, and formed quite a fair idea of what feminine beauty meant. But statues and paintings were cold, inanimate things. The lady in the next room—and he had never before seen a lady in such a state of undress—was quite a different proposition. Very much alive and warm-blooded in fact, as an accidental contact of his hand with her body, while she was applying the iodine, had shown.

His virtuous intentions, moreover, were not helped by the knowledge that she lay so close to him in the next room. But for a thin partition, he could have reached out and stroked her hair. He fancied that he could hear her breathing.

Before he finally fell asleep, he regretfully admitted to himself that he might speak to her again—if he got the chance.

The next evening he met her, by accident, on the landing, and she greeted him with a, "Good evening, Mr. Kennedy. Of course, I accept your apology. It was really my fault for not locking the door, but I was expecting Mrs. Brophy to bring me up a cup of cocoa, as she had promised." She informed him that she was going out to dinner that evening, but that she had fifteen minutes to spare, and he might come in and sit down for a moment, if he would care to.

He would, and he did.

Having succeeded in making friends with Napoleon, he perched himself gingerly on the edge of a chair, facing the divan on which she sat—or perhaps reclined would be the more accurate word.

She tried to look demure, but not succeeding very well, she crossed her knees and reached for a silver cigarette case which she tendered to Louis. He declined, but she took one herself and, as he made no attempt to provide a match, she said:

"Aren't you going to give me a light?"

He fumbled in his pockets for a book of matches and, having found one, he was going to hand it to her. His acquaintance with the movies, however, suddenly reminded him that perhaps the gallant thing to do was to strike a match and hold the light to her cigarette. As he did so, his eyes renewed their acquaintance, for a brief moment, with the upper portion of her gleaming breasts, and he felt a sudden, wild desire to sweep her into his arms, but refrained.

He learned that her name was Betty Bishop, and she told him that she was twenty-one. As a matter of fact, she had not taken off more than two or three years from her real age. He found out little else about her, as she insisted upon keeping the conversation in casual and impersonal channels. He noticed, though, that she wore no rings on her left hand, even if on her right hand there did sparkle a very large diamond surrounded with rubies. He took it for granted that she was of the genus "spinster."

He extracted a promise from her to dine with him the following night, and, as he left, he again remembered his visits to the movies, and he bent over her hand and kissed it—rather gracefully, too. His Gallic blood was certainly coming to the top, alright; she seemed pleased at his action. He was getting along, and he felt quite the gay young devil.

After she had gone out, he was sorry that he had asked her to dinner the following evening. All that evening, even after he was in bed, he tried to forget her fascinations. He almost decided to write her a little note, making some excuse and saying that he would not be able to take her to dinner.

She was a fast hussy, he decided, and then he compared her to Doris. Now Doris never smoked, nor crossed her knees, used rouge or lipstick, nor did any of the other fast things which Betty did. Then, too, Doris had really a prettier face and lovelier hair than did Betty, though he had to admit to himself that he doubted whether Doris' figure would grade up to Betty's. He began trying to picture Doris smoking, crossing her knees and behaving generally as Betty did. Finally he got to wondering—perish the thought—whether Doris might not be more attractive if she were to take a leaf out of Betty's book.

However, Doris was gaining the ascendancy in his estimation—perhaps it was the wonderful lemon meringue pies she could make that turned the scale—until about half past one in the morning. It was at this hour that he heard Betty return, unlock, open, close and re-lock the door; heard her moving about the room, washing and letting her shoes drop with a gentle thud upon the floor; finally, heard her bed creak as she evidently retired for the night.

From this point on until an hour or so later, when Morpheus claimed him, Doris was forgotten, and only Betty filled his thoughts.

The following night he asked her whether she knew of any particular place where she would like to have dinner, as he was not familiar with the kind of restaurant where such a charming lady would care to dine.

She suggested a quiet little French restaurant in the west fifties, and a taxicab presently deposited them at the door. They had an excellent table d'hôte dinner at a dollar a head, and consumed two cocktails and two quarts of quite drinkable white wine, which wouldn't do you any particular harm, especially if you took a dose of bicarbonate of soda afterwards. Still, it did have a kick, and that is about all people bother about these days.

Instead of saying that they consumed the above-mentioned amount of liquor, it would be more correct to say that Betty consumed it. All Louis had was half a cocktail and about two glasses of wine, but that was quite sufficient to go to his head and make his speech a little "slushy." Despite the much larger quantity which she had taken, it seemed to affect Betty scarcely at all, except, possibly, that her laugh was a little gayer and her conversation a little more interesting.

Although he had intended to ask her all about herself, she adroitly parried his few attempts to do so and saw to it that the conversation was concerned mainly with his own affairs. He told her nearly everything about himself that there was to be told, and even casually mentioned Doris. He didn't tell her, though, that he was "practically" engaged to her, and tried not to give the impression that he was, or ever had been especially interested in her. During his recital, Betty frankly studied his fresh, boyish charms, and a keen observer might have noticed that the impression she got was a very favorable one. It should be stated, also, that his open, unsophisticated manner appealed to her strongly.

By the end of the evening, he was so fascinated with Betty that he was ready to eat out of her hand; he would have crawled on his hands and knees all the way down Broadway, had she asked him to.

It was about eleven o'clock when she suggested that it was time to go home. Arrived there, he was given the honor of taking Napoleon for a walk.

When, about ten minutes later, he returned the animal to its mistress, he found the latter in a very charming silk *négligé*. Mind you, perfectly decent, but still a *négligé*. As a reward, perhaps, for taking Napoleon out, she allowed him to come in for a few minutes.

He sat down beside her, and the effects of the wine being still upon him, he grew quite bold—for him. He held her hand, kissed it, and finally—you know how these things happen—his lips found her neck and the little spot behind her ear, which men like to kiss.

"No, not now," she said, when his lips sought hers. "It's time to go to bed."

"But can't I kiss you good night," he whispered.

"Some other time," she replied. "Thanks so much for a pleasant evening." Louis reluctantly returned to his own room, wearily removed his clothing, donned his pyjamas and got into bed.

Perhaps she felt sorry for his obvious disappointment, or perhaps she was thinking of other things. In either case, he hadn't been in bed more than a couple of minutes when he heard a soft double knock on the partition. He sat up in bed, and waited, almost breathless.

"She couldn't mean that for me!" he thought, although he fervently hoped that she did. After a few seconds, the knock was repeated, this time a little louder.

"Perhaps she has been taken ill," thought Louis, "and needs me in a hurry." So, shocking though it may seem, he did not wait to dress, but hastily slipped on a bath-robe and some slippers, and went to her door.

She had turned off the electric light, but the flames of two candles enhanced the prettiness of her face as she lay in bed.

"Did you call me?" he queried, and, having received an affirmative reply, "Are you ill?" he continued.

"No," she whispered, "but, if you will lock the door and promise to be very quiet, I have decided that you may kiss me good night. That is—er—if you would like to?"

He would, and he did.

He was reasonably quiet, but took an awfully long time in doing so. At

least, it was about half-past six when she shook him tenderly and said:

"Don't you think that you ought to be going back to your own room now? It would not look very well if anybody were to see you leaving my room in the morning, with nothing but pyjamas and a bath-robe on."

"Good night, you wonderful creature!" he breathed, as he gave her a parting kiss.

Louis did very little work that day. His mind was too much occupied with the wonderful experience which, for the first time in his life, had been his. He was tired and sad, too, as a man is apt to be, after taking so long to kiss a lady good night. Furthermore, he was terribly conscience-stricken. He shouldn't have done it, and he knew it. To think that he, Louis Kennedy, the son of one of the leading lights in his home-town church circles, should be guilty of such a sin! He supposed that the only way for him to set himself right with his conscience was to ask Betty to marry him. But then he was still "practically" engaged to Doris. Oh, dear! Life was so complicated.

He saw nothing more of Betty that day, but the following evening found them out to dinner again. He explained to her what a cad he felt for having taken advantage of her youth and innocence, or something to that effect. He even vaguely hinted that he thought they ought to get married. He also told the whole story about Doris and how wretched he was that he should have been unfaithful to her.

"I couldn't possibly even dream of marrying Doris now," he continued.

"Oh, I shouldn't worry so much about it," she smilingly counselled. "These things will happen, you know. You needn't bother about me. I am old enough to take care of myself, and I don't want to marry, just at present. As far as Doris goes, what she doesn't know, won't do her any harm." He had

to admit that there might be some truth in this piece of philosophy, although it did not jibe at all with his former ideas of right and wrong.

On the way home from the movie, which they attended after dinner, he determined, however, that he would not again be unfaithful to Doris, whom he knew that he really loved. Arrived with Betty outside her room, though, the physical attraction of a young and beautiful woman who returned him kiss for kiss, and who had taken him into a world of hitherto-undreamed-of delights, won out over his more idealistic love for Doris. Regretfully, therefore, we must state that he again consumed several hours in kissing Betty good-night.

So, for that matter, did he on several following nights. Then, at the end of about a week, she suddenly told him that she must go away.

"You see, I have a husband waiting for me," she explained. Louis was shocked—stunned! Not only had he been untrue to Doris and indulged in entirely illicit pleasure, but he had also assisted in a violation of the vows of holy matrimony.

What Betty neglected to say, though, was that it was another woman's husband who was waiting for her, and who was paying the rent of a dinky little flat in Boston, and making her a generous allowance besides. Said husband had

also given her a nice, fat check to take a trip to New York to visit her sister, or at least that is what she told him. She might have stayed at the Ritz with the amount he gave her, but, knowing that she would not always be young and beautiful, she was wisely economizing at Mrs. Brophy's, and laying away a nice little nest-egg for her old age. As a matter of fact, she was quite fond of said husband, even though he was not her own. But he was nearly fifty, and being married, too, he couldn't get around to see her very often. And, as everybody will understand, girls will be girls!

After Betty had gone, did Louis commit suicide or pine away from yearning for her? We'll whisper to a waiting world that he did not. A few weeks later, he was again with Doris, and aided by the confidence which his recent amorous adventures had given him, he persuaded her to elope to New York and marry him.

You may want to know something of their honeymoon.

"Did Louis," perhaps you'll ask, "really love Doris? Did he give her the full benefit of the interesting lessons in love which he had learned from Betty? Did he take as long to kiss Doris good night as had been the case with Betty?"

The answer is "You Bett-y (he) did!"



THE WOODS COLT

By Leah M. Driesbach

LAVINIA GREEN loved scandal, and her chief vexation in life was that she had to live in a district so isolated that only once in a blue moon anything of a libelous nature happened. Five years before, her hired man had run away with the wife of a neighboring rancher. Lavinia had derived a vicarious delight intermingled with horror in gloating over all the details, known or guessed at, for several months following, long after the sordid affair had been forgotten by everyone else. Finally the aggrieved husband had apparently recovered, as evidenced by his marriage to his housekeeper, and even Lavinia could not conjecture any previous wrongdoing between him and the dour, pious woman whom he had taken to wife.

Therefore, when the spinster arrived home after a two months' sojourn in the east, she eagerly faced her niece, an anticipatory light of pleasure in her sharp black eyes.

"Now tell me the news," she demanded, "All the way out in the buggy, Zeb kept mum as a rock and when I asked what had happened while I was gone, he said cranky-like, 'You'll find out without my tellin' you.' 'Pears to me he's getting mighty upsitty for a hired man." She stared inquisitively at the fat, expressionless face of the younger woman and gave a sniff of disapproval on noting her unkempt appearance. The criticism was lost on Mattie, however, as she reached for another chocolate and crammed it between her full, greedy lips, while one hand lazily pushed back a drooping lock of oily red hair.

"Mattie!" The sharp reproof made her sit upright and she swallowed hastily.

"Yes'm. There ain't been nothing 'cept Waneta Boardman has a woods colt." She peered up nervously at the disappointed countenance of her aunt.

"Woods colt! Where did Old Man Boardman get enough money to buy another horse? Don't believe he's ever paid for the old nag he's got now." She broke off at the sound of Mattie's low chuckle. The girl eyed her slyly.

"Laws, Aunt Lavinny! You sure are dumb! Don't you know what these hillikens mean when they speak of a woods colt? Do you 'member that mare, Fanny, we had three years ago?" she continued, without waiting for the other to reply, "'Member how she wandered off into the hills in the spring and came back nearly a year later with a colt ambling at her heels?"

Lavinia nodded and a thrill crept over her lean frame.

"Well," drawled Mattie, heaving herself slowly from the chair and reaching for another piece of candy, "Two months ago—right after you left, Waneta Boardman went away and when she came back, she brought a woods colt with her."

Lavinia wet her lips eagerly and a cruel glint shone in her eyes.

"You mean she had a baby?"

"Yes," agreed Mattie, "I was up by their place the day after Zeb told me she was to home and saw Waneta in the yard, hugging and kissing the baby. What's more, I don't know who the father is. There she lives, five miles further in the hills than we do, and

never goes anywhere. There's only three men who ever go by there and I ain't had time nor sense enough to figure out which one it could be."

Lavinia eyed her placid niece in exasperated wonder. The girl was getting more stupid every day.

"Well, Mattie Green! You know as well as I do that it must be Zeb. I've never trusted that young lout since I hired him and he was always making some excuse to go over there." She swept a nervous hand over her thin, sallow face.

"If I knew 'twas him, I'd order him off the place!"

Mattie leaned back and closed her eyes wearily. She was accustomed to her aunt's harangues and knew she could not escape until the older woman had exhausted herself on this new tidbit of gossip.

"But how about Lee Blaine?" continued the grating voice, "He was here boarding with us last fall during the hunting season and you saw her in that swell car with him once."

"Oh, Aunt Lavinny!" protested Mattie, but the woman swept on, intent as a bloodhound on a fresh track.

"When you wrote a month ago that he'd come again for the fishing, I was so plumb tickled over getting such good board money that I never suspicioned a thing. Now I know! These city fellows are always running after country girls for no good purpose. He, with his silk socks and bath salts, as he calls them! Says they soften the water! Why don't he use borax? Just an excuse to put perfume in the water. Indecent, I say! And you mark my words, Mattie! There is something wrong with any man who can't wear flannel nightshirts like our fathers did, instead of silk pants to sleep in."

She rose hastily and began setting plates upon the table with hands that trembled. Mattie awkwardly assisted her, a troubled frown on her face.

"Aw, he's all right, Aunt Lavinny. And you do need his board money. You wrote that you'd have to fire Zeb if you didn't get some extra money in, and now you can keep him to do the chores."

Lavinia whirled angrily. "If I knew Zeb was the man, I'd pack him off in a jiffy! All you're concerned about is whether you'll have a little more work to do. You don't appreciate what I've done for you! The help you give me don't pay for your keep, and you would be in a children's home today, if it wasn't for me."

Without a word, Mattie walked heavily into the kitchen and Lavinia continued muttering crossly to herself as she moved about at her task.

Of course she did not want to discharge Zeb, who worked for smaller wages and did more labor than any man she had ever employed. Also, it would be as painful as having a tooth extracted to lose Lee Blaine, with his cheerful way of paying the exorbitant board money she charged, but Lavinia stood for righteousness and she would not have an immoral person in her house. So that was that! If Lee, with his city wiles and silk-clad personality, had overcome the scruples of a simple-minded little idiot like Waneta Boardman, he should be made to decamp from the uncontaminated atmosphere of her home.

As for Waneta, it was not at all surprising that she should have strayed from the path of virtue. The daughter of a drunken ne'er-do-well and a frail, sentimental mother, who had lived just long enough to bestow upon her baby the foolish name she had heard in a mawkish song. That the name was of Spanish origin and therefore spelled differently than it was pronounced, had never occurred to the bereaved husband, but he carried out his wife's request to the best of his ability; the baby was christened Waneta and everyone was

satisfied, with the exception of Lavinia, who had no use for such high-fangled names but preferred the good old-fashioned ones, like Jane or Prudence.

The sound of voices drew her into the kitchen where she found Lee Blaine in laughing conversation with Mattie, and though she greeted him pleasantly enough, her lips tightened ominously.

"Seems good to be back in the country, Miss Green." His roguish eyes smiled up at her, as he hurriedly thrust an unlighted cigarette into his pocket. "Only one blot on my joy, and that is the Reverend Calvin Jones."

Lavinia eyed him disapprovingly and wondered if she could have been housing an atheist. Anything connected with religion should not be spoken of lightly.

"The Reverend has boarded with us off and on for many years. Longer than you have, Mr. Blaine. And we know he is a good man."

"Y-yes," he assented slowly, "But when meal hour comes I'm so blamed hungry, and when he says grace it takes so everlastingly long for him to get it out of his system." He caught Mattie's grin of sympathy and it emboldened him. "Anyhow, you just *think* he is better than I am because he happens to be a preacher. You don't know for sure."

The words seemed fraught with sinister meaning and Lavinia's eyes turned in alarm to Mattie. Was he insinuating that the itinerate minister who graced their board was not all that he should be? Immediately, she tried to reject the idea as absurd, but when he entered the house a few minutes later, she greeted him with suspicious eyes.

The Reverend Calvin Jones was in appearance all that his name implied; tall and spare with the hard-lined, piercing-eyed face of one accustomed to giving directions as to how to reach heaven, and expecting them to be believed and obeyed. Now, he sensed that something had irritated the good woman

who was his hostess and he sought to pacify her.

"A beautiful scarf you are wearing, Miss Green, and extremely becoming. Something you bought in the East?" His fingers tentatively stroked one end of the silken fabric and his eyes sought hers in benign complacency. Lavinia drew back abruptly, angry with herself—who hated all men—for responding with a thrill to his touch.

"The woman I was nursing back there gave it to me," she replied stiffly, "I never spend money on foolish fripperies. I do not care for the vanities of this world, Reverend Jones." But her eyes belied her words as she adjusted the scarf about her wrinkled neck, and Mattie smiled secretly, knowing that her aunt derived an immeasurable satisfaction from the gift.

The preacher turned to Zeb, who had shuffled into the dining-room bringing with him a faint odor of the barnyard.

"Zeb, my lad, I do not wish you to unharness my faithful horse, as I have a ministerial call to make after supper." He smiled graciously at Lavinia, swept a disapproving glance over the imperturbable Lee, then his eyes softened as they came to rest on the round curve of Mattie's bare arm.

"And now O Lord——"

After Lavinia had helped Mattie with the dishes, she rolled down her sleeves and started from the room with quick, determined steps, calling back over her shoulder:

"I'm going to set awhile on the porch and think over this problem. Call Zeb. I've got orders to give."

Shortly thereafter, Zeb, resplendent in shiny, blue serge, his face polished and red from an unaccustomed shave, joined her on the veranda. From the pocket of his coat protruded a package.

"I'm in kinda hurry, Miss Green," he stammered, "I got a long walk to take."

"Where to?" she demanded tersely.

"Jest up to see—to see Old Man Boardman 'bout a plow handle."

"Zeb, don't lie to me! You're going to see that hussy! What have you got there?" Like a streak of lightning, her claw-like hand darted out and pulled forth the parcel. The paper wrapping fell to the floor and in her hand lay a small, sleazy piece of silk and lace. She held it from her as though it was a scorpion.

"A baby bonnet!"

A painful flush mounted to the boy's face and he averted his eyes from the hostile glare. Lavinia rose, a revulsive shudder creeping over her.

"Zeb Moore, don't you say one word! I'm going to do my duty and find out a thing or two. If it is as I suspect, you'll have to get off my place, even if it leaves me to do all the work." With majestic dignity, she swept into the house, leaving a much-befuddled, angry youth in her wake.

In the living room, she found her city boarder awaiting her, a guileless smile on his face. Tranquilly, he drew a check from his pocket and handed it to her, and her hasty glance showed it was for twenty-five dollars.

"Miss Green, I want you to do something for me. When you go to Moab again, I wish you'd pick out some pretty baby clothes to give to a girl I feel sorry for. I know she hasn't much and, as she has had so much trouble, I think we all should help her, don't you?"

Lavinia stiffened and she spoke with an effort.

"Young man, you take that back," she flung the piece of paper on the table. "You may be like you pretend, just a good-hearted, sympathetic man. If you are, all right. But if I satisfy myself that there's another powerful good reason for your posing as a philanthropist, I'll have to give you notice to vacate, even thought I do need your board and room money." With the air of

an outraged queen, she sailed past the astounded man and into the kitchen. Mattie shrank back in alarm, but Lavinia grasped her by the wrist.

"You come with me as witness. I can't stand this uncertainty any longer. You and I are going to see that Jezebel and learn a thing or two."

Despite the girl's protests, she hurried her into the barn and, between them, they managed to get the horse harnessed and the dilapidated buggy out of the enclosure. In grim silence, Lavinia urged the animal down the dusty road, only occasionally replying to Mattie's incoherent questions with an ominous grunt.

Halfway to their destination, they drew aside to allow an oncoming vehicle to pass, and when it drove alongside, Lavinia looked into the dismayed face of the Reverend Calvin Jones. He leaned forward and there was keen anxiety in his tones.

"Anything wrong, Miss Green?"

"Decidedly!" The answer was crisp, as Lavinia had suddenly realized that those eyes, that had always seemed so soulful and like unto a martyr's, had become shifting, distrustful orbs with evil lights in them.

"Where have you been, Reverend?" she demanded, her voice biting with sarcasm. "Does your church work take you out of an evening to the homes of fallen women?"

The large, bony hands of the man rose in protest. "Oh, my dear Miss Green, do not speak so! We must be charitable to others. Even though we disapprove of her way of making a living, we should not judge so harshly. The poor child should not have stones cast at her by us, who may be living in glass houses of our own making!"

"Stop right there, Reverend!" Lavinia picked up the reins and the horse lazily started. "If you choose to talk allegorically, I'll have to do the same. My house hasn't got even a tiny win-

dowpane in it, and I never knew you before to admit yours had. I may be doing you an injustice, and if so I'll gladly apologize, but I'm going to satisfy myself about a thing or two. I thought first Zeb was the responsible party. Then I shifted the blame to Lee Blaine. Now, since you admit being surrounded with glass, I'm forced again to change my mind. I hate to lose you as a boarder, and I pray that I'll find myself mistaken, so I won't have to ask you to leave."

By this time, even so slow a horse as Lavinia's had managed to get out of earshot of the stupefied preacher, but Lavinia ranted on, directing her remarks to the world at large. Finally, she appealed to Mattie.

"Isn't it aggravating? I don't know where I'm at!"

"Why should you care?" challenged the girl. "After all, it's none of your business, and you are making trouble for yourself. If Zeb leaves, we have all the chores to do. If Mr. Blaine or the Reverend goes, you'll lose out on board money and can't pay Zeb's wages to boot."

"Nevertheless, the guilty man quits my house," returned her aunt stubbornly. "Why, every time I'd look at him—whichever he is—I'd be thinking of the wicked things he's done." Her voice rose hysterically. "I couldn't stand to have a man around that I knew was impure. You and I would never feel safe!"

"Shucks!" replied Mattie complacently. "We've been safe so far. Zeb's a harmless, eighteen-year-old kid; Mr. Blaine's a polite, nice gentleman; and the Reverend is a good, pious man. I don't believe any of them is the one. They've all treated me like a lady."

Her aunt laughed, a short, grating sound. "You're freckled, fat and homely," she stated with cruel emphasis. "Waneta is pretty and slim. That makes a difference." Ignoring the tears that

ran down Mattie's cheeks, she drove in rigid silence for a while, intent on planning her method of attack.

"I'm going to give Waneta this scarf and tell her I bought it for her back east," she announced suddenly, and removed the fragile lace from her neck. Mattie looked her surprise.

"Why, Aunt Lavinny! You have wanted a pretty scarf for years. I don't think you are called upon to sacrifice that, even if you do feel sorry for her."

"Sorry for her!" the woman hissed angrily. "I'm not sorry for her. I hate her! Vile little loose creature! But I've got to gain her confidence, haven't I? And she's the kind of shallow pate that will tell me anything if she thinks I'm her friend. And listen here!" Her thin fingers closed with savage force on the arm of her niece. "You keep your mouth shut every minute and let me do the talking! I won't have you messing the thing up."

So in silence, Mattie watched her aunt greet with warm affection the slight, pretty girl, who was genuinely glad to see them, noted her aunt, who abhorred babies, take the crying little piece of humanity up in her arms and murmur words of endearment.

Mattie observed these things with growing discomfort, and her hands twisted in helpless indignation, when Lavinia handed her scarf to the grateful Waneta, who exclaimed in delight over the beauty of it.

"Oh! I must show it to Maisie." Going to the door that opened into the dining room, she cried, "Come out, Maisie, and meet my friends. Maisie is my cousin, who is visiting me," she informed her surprised guests.

The visitor entered, a girl of about twenty-one, with a good-natured face that was plastered with cosmetics and surmounted by curly, bobbed hair of that intense yellow hue which is acquired only by the diligent application of peroxide. She smiled broadly.

"I keep scarce until 'Neta passes the word that it's friends in the house. I know country folks has a prejudice against my profession."

"And pray, what *is* your profession?" inquired Lavinia with suspicious politeness. Maisie flashed her a sharp look.

"Why, show business—burlesque." She chuckled dryly. "The Reverend Calvin Jones has been trying to save my soul ever since I came." She turned to Waneta. "I'm going in the kitchen, honey, and heat some water."

Lavinia gazed disapprovingly at the girl's generous display of silk-clad legs as she flounced from the room.

"I didn't know there were actresses in your family, Waneta," she commented severely. "When did she come?"

"About ten days ago. Ain't she awful stylish?"

Lavinia sniffed and opened her prim mouth to deliver a tart reply, then checked herself as she reflected that time was passing and she had not obtained the information that she had come after. She leaned forward and put her arm around Waneta's shoulders. The girl smiled shyly into the searching, eager eyes, and Mattie almost wished that her aunt, with her abnormal sense of curiosity, was dead. It seemed such needless cruelty to drag forth into the cold light, the confidence of this simple, trusting girl.

"Waneta, you know I'm your friend," wheedled the voice. "We came to see you and the baby, and you've shown things and said things that confuse me terribly. You showed us the gold necklace that Lee Blaine gave the baby; and you let us see the little gold ring that Reverend Jones gave it; and before I came, Zeb showed me a baby bonnet he bought. Still, we don't know the baby's father."

The girl looked up in mild surprise. "No, I know you don't."

"No, I don't." Impatiently, Lavinia edger her chair closer. "I have thought

that it might be any one of these three men, and if I don't find out the truth and make amends to two of them, I'll always be unhappy, knowing I've done them an injustice. You see, I've practically accused Zeb, then Mr. Blaine and then the Reverend. I've insulted all three."

"My land!" breathed the girl. "You sure have!" She stared in round-eyed amazement at the flushed spinster.

"Well, then, who *is* the father?" Lavinia demanded irritably. "Surely, the baby *has* a father."

"No, the baby has not a father," returned Waneta slowly. "You see—you see, the father——"

"Leave the explaining to me, 'Neta!" commanded the gruff voice of her cousin, and Maisie appeared in the open doorway. Her keen eyes swept in contempt over the older woman.

"You evidently have got the wrong steer on this deal, lady. And Waneta, poor kid, don't get your drift, but I do. I heard every word, and it didn't take me long to get wise to the fact that you were pinning the badge of motherhood on the wrong female." She drew a vanity case from her pocket and proceeded to powder her nose while Lavinia glared her indignation.

"That youngster belongs to *me*!" stated the actress emphatically. "After it was born, two months ago, I sent for Waneta to come and bring it home with her while I went on a short tour, so as to get enough kale to pay doctor and hospital bills. Then I came on here. Now is Your Censorship satisfied?" She grinned satirically at the confused woman who was hastily getting to her feet.

"Very interesting, I'm sure." Lavinia's tone was bitter with sarcasm. "Especially the information that Waneta gave about the poor little baby having no father——"

"Stop right there!" commanded Maisie harshly. "That's another important item that you got wrong. The baby hasn't a father because Jack Gardner—who was

OH, WHAT A MISTAKE!

By Robert Bliss

EVERYBODY predicted that Rodney Wells would make a good husband for some lucky woman.

He didn't have a single bad habit. Of that devilish trio, wine, women and song, he had no ear for music and no taste for wine. As for women—

That was the principal reason why the world knew Rodney would make a good husband. He simply had no desire for affairs with women. Never had the superintendent of his bachelor apartment seen any woman, tall or short, flapper-thin or Oriental-plump, retiring or kiss-me-hard type, stepping cautiously out of Rodney's rooms early in the morning.

As usual, the world was exactly one hundred and five per cent wrong.

For, if there was one thing on earth that delighted Rodney, it was the idea of having a breathless, reckless, mad affair—not with one woman, but with an endless succession of fascinating women. Underneath his mask of Sir Galahad was the face of a Don Juan.

Why then, didn't he do as he desired and pass his time buying expensive feminine trifles and making out checks for value received? The answer was so simple that everybody overlooked it. Rodney was timid.

Yes, with the soul of a Casanova, he had the technique of a Parsifal. He respected women so much that he was afraid of them. Not that he didn't kiss a sweet girl occasionally, or hold her so close that she wondered where her next breath was coming from. What I mean is that when it came to the point of demanding complete surrender—well, Rodney simply hadn't the nerve.

When he met Otilie Bryant, however,

things were different. Otilie was past the age of thirty-four, and though plain of feature and angular as to figure, had sense. She had sense enough to make Rodney believe he was conquering her by degrees. And so, before long, Rodney was having a romantic adventure of the sort he had always dreamed of having. There were passionate kisses, thrilling awakenings in strange hotel rooms—everything, in fact, was as wild, and reckless, and unrestrained as could be. The fact that all these unrestrained kisses and embraces were legalized by his marriage to Otilie, made no difference. A wild love-affair is a wild love-affair, whether a man has it with his wife or his sweetheart. Rodney was enchanted.

After the honeymoon they came back to New York and started their married life together in the Park Avenue apartment Otilie's father had given them as a wedding-present. For Otilie's people were wealthy real-estate people. That was one of the nicest things about Otilie. And the newly-weds were very happy until dangerous desires began to re-awaken in Rodney, sweet desires that had nothing to do with his wife Otilie. Again he longed to have affairs with a number of ladies in succession.

It wasn't Rodney's fault that he felt this way. It was the fault of his marriage. For his marriage had cured him of his timidity towards women. Having conquered Otilie, he felt he had the ability to conquer any other woman he desired. He resolved to look around boldly.

Alas for human happiness! Things can never be perfect. Before marriage

Rodney had had desires without confidence. Now he had both desires and confidence. But—he also had a wife. Otilie was straight-laced, and had money. If she found out he was having a romance with some other women, she would promptly divorce him. Rodney had no desire to go back to the comparative poverty of his bachelor days. So a year sped by and then another, and still Rodney had not had a single affair with a strange woman.

And then Annette came into his life.

Annette was a widow. She thought a lot of herself as a vampire. She went in for the deadly white-face and titian-head effect. She could drink any woman under the table. She smoked and did other things a lady shouldn't do—such as showing interest in other women's husbands. Yes, she strongly opposed wives for men and camisoles for women. She lived up to both planks in her platform.

She liked Rodney even better than she liked most men. For she sensed that he was looking for something. She decided that he was looking for her.

She met him at a charity-ball. Attired in a voluptuous sea-green gown shimmering with rhinestones, she was selling packages of cigarettes. They were twelve-cent cigarettes, but for sweet charity's sake she was selling them for five dollars per pack. For a purchase of five packages she threw in a kiss. Nobody bought more than one until Rodney hove in sight.

Her red hair and the come-hither in her pale green eyes dazzled Rodney, in search of adventure. He bought ten packages of the imported cigarettes—imported from Virginia. He got two kisses. Compared to the domestic variety he had been getting from Otilie, Annette's kisses also seemed imported. Before he left the bazaar he made a dizzy date with her.

He was supposed to attend to some of Otilie's real-estate business during

his waking hours. But he could always manage to get away for an afternoon. The afternoon following his meeting with Annette, he called on her for tea. She served tea with a kick. Rodney didn't kick. He felt he was having a tremendous adventure.

After tea he got perfumed kisses from Annette, which he wanted, without having to pay for cigarettes, which he didn't want. His experience with Otilie made him very bold with Annette. But in spite of his courage, the first afternoon didn't develop anything more interesting than kisses.

But he came again. He grew bolder and bolder. And while he demonstrated to Annette that he was a bold lover, he talked of what a sheik he could really be if he were free. But he didn't do more than talk about it.

For, somehow, the image of Otilie was present to him in Annette's drawing-room. He could see her sharp eyes, he could feel her wrath. And somehow he felt sure she would discover him, if he continued making a trail to Annette's apartment. He had a lot of respect for Otilie's instinct and judgment.

Annette seemed to realize he respected his wife too much to make real love to herself in the same town. So she suggested going away for the week-end with her. She suggested it four times before Rodney seemed to hear her. The eighth time she mentioned it, Rodney said yes. At that moment he was reclining on a couch with his head on Annette's silken lap and her perfumed fingers caressing his curly locks. Under such circumstances, what could a gentleman do but say yes?

He went home to prepare for the trip. But somehow all his desire to take it was gone. He simply couldn't attempt to make excuses to Otilie for going away by himself for three days. He knew her suspicious mind would at once hit on the truth. He was dreadfully afraid of his wife.

So, the next morning, while Annette was packing, she received a note by messenger from Rodney. It said:

Darling:

I am suffering from a sty on my eye. I can't see our trip together just now.

It was a poor excuse, but Annette understood it perfectly. She made but one remark, but made it at such blistering length that the messenger boy ran, not walked, to the nearest exit.

She raged all day. She grabbed her newest and loveliest nightie from her suitcase and tore it to shreds. She wouldn't miss it. She had no use for it now. Oh, she was angry! Hell hath no fury like a woman deprived of a week-end!

Rodney sensed that. He skillfully kept out of her way thereafter. In fact, he never saw Annette again. Soon this half-adventure faded from his mind.

But he soon discovered he still craved an adventure, not a little anemic one such as the one with Annette, but a full-blooded one. There was a reason for this discovery. The reason was little Winnie Sanderson.

Winnie was small, kissably plump, blonde. She had roguish gray eyes, a bit of a nose and two deep dimples in her cheeks. Rodney's first glimpse of her showed him all this and made him want to see much more of her.

He first saw her in the window of a big drug-store. She was demonstrating a new kind of rouge. Rodney was spell-bound for ten consecutive minutes. Then he went in and bought a lot of rouge. He told Winnie to keep both the change and the purchase.

After making an impression on her like that, he waited for her at the door. She stopped demonstrating at six o'clock. Rodney politely persuaded her to stay for dinner with him at a big hotel. Winnie didn't mind. She was hungry.

The dinner was a great success. Winnie devoured her food, politely of course, and Rodney devoured Winnie—with his eyes. He had conceived an instantaneous passion for her. She looked the sort of girl who could give a man many delightful memories. Besides, and most important, Winnie was not in his wife's class of society, as Annette had been. It was most unlikely that Winnie and Otilie could ever meet. To have a romance with the little rouge demonstrator would be not only blissful, but safe!

So, just as a stage-door Johnny waits outside a stage-entrance, he haunted the door of the big drug-store. He got into the habit of taking Winnie home to her little furnished room on University Square. He often accepted her invitation to come up and rest a bit—not that he rested when he got upstairs. He was delighted with Winnie. She was such a contrast to Annette. Annette's kissing technique, for instance, had annoyed him a great deal. Like a woman who tries to lead a man when she dances with him, Annette had done most of the leading in their kissing. Winnie, on the other hand, liked to be led. Rodney led her.

Soon he realized he had the courage of his passion. He came one evening with a little bank-book in her name and a little sum consisting of a digit and a number of naughty little noughts after it. Winnie tried to pay him for this as she had paid for a number of his presents—with kisses. But he soon persuaded her that this little present required a very special reward. He mentioned the week-end idea to her.

Winnie had a sense of justice. She said yes.

Rodney was delighted. He had been afraid to collect his reward there in the city. Possibly someone might see him coming from University Place early one morning—you never could tell whose eyes were on you in town. But in some

secluded country-spot, under a different name, Winnie and he would be not only happy but safe. And his conscience wouldn't hurt him about Otilie as much as it might hurt in the city.

And now there remained only the making of suspicion-proof excuses to Otilie. Rodney ransacked his brains. Love for Winnie gave him the craft of a diplomat.

He told Otilie he had received a long-distance call from his Aunt Tabitha in Boston. He knew Otilie hated Aunt Tabby. For his aunt was a flapper-aunt. She was only about ten years older than Otilie, but actually looked younger, thanks to her hair-dresser, her couturier, and the bloom of youth which is sold over drug-store counters. Otilie could never forgive Tabitha for her way of saying, "We girls" to her.

"Must you go?" she asked Rodney angrily.

"She's very sick," answered Rodney. "I owe a lot to her, and in this crisis I must be there."

Otilie developed a cold rage of objection, but Rodney kept on talking. He even told Otilie it was her duty to go with him to his aunt's sick-bed. He knew that the more you urged Otilie to do a thing, the more she didn't want to do it.

He was right. Otilie refused point-blank. Rodney looked very mournful, packed his grip, kissed his wife's cold cheek, and rushed to the station.

Winnie was waiting there for him.

That evening, just before sundown, they reached that famous country-club and hotel known as Laurel Meadows Hotel. It was a safe and sane distance from New York. Rodney had seen the place advertised in the papers as a quiet, restful, exclusive place. He figured that there would be few if any guests, as it was too early in the season.

His supposition proved correct. As he advanced to the hotel-register to inscribe the usual fib upon it, none of the few loungers in the lobby paid Winnie and him the slightest attention.

When they were alone at last in a quaint room exquisitely done in Colonial style, Rodney heaved a sigh of joyous anticipation. He was about to enter upon his first love-adventure. It was going to be fearfully thrilling.

It was.

In fact, it exceeded his fondest expectations. Each kiss was more exciting than the preceeding one. Little Winnie proved entirely worthy of the honor of being the accomplice in his first real adventure.

And yet, the next morning, when he awoke, Rodney's first thought was somehow not of Winnie, but of Otilie. But it was a pleasant thought. Otilie was already a distant memory. Rodney congratulated himself on having chosen this charming, distant spot, Laurel Meadows.

Winnie and he had breakfast in their own suite. She was more adorable than ever in a transparent, flesh-colored *négligé*. She didn't object at all to seasoning each course with kisses and embraces. Rodney rose to heights of happiness. He coaxed her to his knee and fed her bits of toast and more kisses. In return for his kindness Winnie gave him a kiss that all but made him lose consciousness.

At this delirious moment there came a thunderous knocking at the door.

It proved to be a boy with a telegram for Mr. E. A. Smith, which, Rodney could not deny, was his name on the hotel register.

In an astonished daze he opened it and read:

Hope you are enjoying the country air.
OTILIE.

An awful, sickish feeling came over him. He flopped into a chair and clutched his poor, reeling head with both hands to keep it from flying off.

"What's the matter?" cried Winnie.

"It's from my wife—she's found out I'm here," managed Rodney.

"But I thought you threw her off the track," said Winnie, after reading the fatal telegram.

"I thought so, too," said Rodney miserably, "but I was wrong. Nobody can fool Otilie. Good grief, what am I going to do now?"

A hundred questions buzzed in his brain.

How had Otilie found out he was not in Boston? How did she know he was E. A. Smith? And, most unpleasant of all, what was she going to do, now that she knew?

She undoubtedly had evidence for a divorce. What if she wanted to use it? Rodney started up, his face red with a fever of worry. He must go back to New York immediately. He must coax Otilie, beg her, implore her, plead with her. He couldn't do without her money.

"No, no," he cried wildly to Winnie, who was approaching with consolation in the form of rosy lips puckered up for a kiss, "I've got to go home."

A half hour later he left Winnie to enjoy the delights of Laurel Meadows by herself—if she could. He took the first train to New York.

Noon found him at the apartment-house. He rushed into the lobby, into the elevator, upstairs, into his own apartment.

He found Otilie resting on a *chaise-longue*. He approached her, his head hanging low.

Oh, she was skillful, was Otilie—and malicious, now that she had her man down. She did not burst into reproaches as he came nearer, but merely gave him one icy glance.

"So," she sneered, "you've come back from your loving aunt's rather early." The way she emphasized "loving aunt" made Rodney tremble all over.

"Yes, darling—I've come back," said Rodney, "dearest—I—I'll never do it again."

"I should hope not!" snapped Otilie indignantly. Rodney shivered.

"Sweetest," he groaned, dropping on his knees, "it was a little mistake—I won't ever be guilty again."

Haughtily she pulled away the fur-bordered *négligé* which Rodney was about to kiss in penitence.

"That's a nice way to treat a faithful and loving wife!" she said with a catch in her voice. Then her tone hardened again. "If you think I'm going to stand for such vile actions from you any longer——"

"I know—I shouldn't have done it, but I was carried away by my feelings," he stammered. "I really love you, dearest, and you alone." He seized her bony hand and showered it with kisses. She seemed to relent a trifle. Rodney seized her in his arms. She softened perceptibly. Joy shot through him. After all, she hadn't mentioned divorce—perhaps his open remorse had won!

"Forgive me!" he cried.

"Perhaps I will, perhaps I won't," she said. "Tell me all about it—start at the beginning, and don't leave out a thing. Was she as you expected?"

Rodney winced at the irony of her tone.

"I—I first saw her in a Broadway shop-window, demonstrating cosmetics," he confessed; "wait—don't interrupt me—I must clear my conscience. Something about her made me forget myself. I know now it was her appeal to my lower nature. I—I used to visit her, and she lured me on and on with her kisses——"

Otilie wrenched her hands away from him with great force. He heard her gasp.

"Don't you want to hear more?" he asked unhappily.

"I want to hear everything," said Otilie in a low, tense tone.

"She is a vampire," continued Rodney. "She bewitched me. She made me buy her things. And yesterday she made me take her to Laurel Meadows and stay there with her. But when I got your

WAITIN' FOR BEN

By Thomas J. Gigg

"NINETEEN-FOURTEEN you left here, sir? You'll find changes."

The man at the soda fountain mixed my lemon phosphate and placed it before me. I was back on a business call in the small town of my young days after a spell in South America, and had dropped into the little corner drug-store to learn what I could of the happenings to old friends during the years of my absence.

"Yes, sir, you'll find changes—been a lot even since I came five years ago," he went on conversationally.

"Guess you know some of the folks I want to look up," I said. "Old Harding, the marshal, for instance?"

"Dead, sir, year after I came. Flu."

"And old man Trevarrow, of the Vindicator Mine? I used to work for him."

"He struck it rich two years ago and went south to live."

"Well, well! Guess most of the old-timers are gone. Now there's the Wilson place." I was looking out through the open door, beyond the town to Big Bull Mountain, where a snug little ranch lay at the edge of the pine woods. "Wilson still up there?"

"Sam Wilson? Yeah."

"That's the son. I'm glad of that." Sam had been my particular friend in the old days. "That's one place I'll be welcome, anyway."

The man stood looking thoughtfully up at the little mountain farm.

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure of that," he said doubtfully. "There's not any I know welcome up there. Sam ain't exactly sociable. He's queer."

"Sam queer? Why, he used to be one of the jolliest of the boys. Easy-going and a bit bashful, but a good fellow just the same."

"Well, I've never known him other than he is now—'Crazy Sam' they call him."

"Crazy? Sam Wilson?"

"Well, sir, what else would you call a man that spends all his spare time sittin' up there at the edge of the woods with a gun, and forever looking down here towards the town? Seems to be watching for something or somebody—nobody knows what. He's done that ever since I came."

"But," I asked, more and more astonished, "what brought him to this?"

"Can't say, sir. It was before my time—"

A bunch of young folks had entered and seated themselves at a little table. The man went to take their order and I left the store. And when I decided to go up at once to the Wilson ranch, it was not only to renew my acquaintance with my old pal but to probe, if possible, the mystery of 'Crazy Sam.'

Leaving the town I took the trail up Big Bull Mountain. When half way up I saw, standing on the edge of the pine woods the tall figure of a man. With a hand shading his eyes he was watching my approach.

"That's Sam, I'll bet," I said; and, leaving the trail that led to the farm, made straight for the woods beyond it. As I drew near the man stepped forward eagerly to meet me. Then suddenly he stopped, disappointment and dejection in all his attitude. Yet it was Sam, my old friend—but how terribly

changed! He was looking old and gaunt, and there was something in his eyes it was not good to see.

"Don't you know me, Sam?" I said, holding out my hand.

He studied my face earnestly.

"You bet! It's Jim Hubbard," he said, the grim lines about his mouth relaxing into a feeble effort at a smile. "Glad to see you, Jim."

"But you looked," I could not refrain from remarking, "as if you'd have been a lot more glad to see somebody else."

"You said it!" he admitted. "When I saw you coming up the hill there, I saw by your clothes it was none of the boys hereabouts and I thought— But it don't matter. Come, sit down here and tell me how things have gone with you."

As I sat down on the fallen pine log I noticed, in the grass at his feet, a Winchester rifle.

"Been after jack-rabbits?" I remarked casually.

"Yeah," he replied, the ghost of a smile round the corners of his mouth. "Now tell me, boy, where you been an' what you been doin'?"

I told him briefly. But his interest was not keen and, at times, I was sure he was not even listening. With a listless, fixed stare he was again looking down the trail to town.

"Now, it's your turn, Sam," I said as I finished. "I want to hear all about you. I only arrived a couple of hours ago and came straight here."

He fidgeted in embarrassment.

"I ain't askin' you down to the house, Jim," he said. "Things ain't the same as when you came before—"

"And neither are you, Sam," I ventured. "Why, man, if I'd met you downtown I wouldn't have known you."

"They'd tell you down there about 'Crazy Sam,' I guess."

"They told me nothing," I lied. "But I want you to tell me. What's brought you to this?"

"I believe I will, Jim. It'll do me good," he said slowly. "I've kept it to myself for eight years. Gee! They'd have laughed if they'd known; but you won't, Jim. Remember Katie Ryan, old Joe Ryan's girl!"

"You bet I do! The prettiest face and the sauciest tongue in town. She'd half the boys in the district after her."

"Fools, fools, every one of them!" he muttered. "An' me the biggest fool of the bunch! 'Twas the summer after you left I came into the running. By an' by it came down to just two of us, Ben Moore and me. Remember Ben Moore, over on Gilbert's ranch? First she favored Ben, because he was better-lookin' an' he'd a winnin' way with the girls; then she favored me because I'd my old father's place to come into, and Ben had nothing."

"So it went on all summer. Then my father died an' the farm was mine. The day after the funeral I went to Katie an' asked her to come an' be mistress of the place. An' she did. We was married in September—an' the little minx made Ben Moore be best man at the wedding! Oh, she was a picture that day an' no mistake—with her pink an' white cheeks, an' her eyes on the ground, an' her white veil, an' all."

He stopped, a far-away reminiscent look in his eyes.

"So you won the fair Katie?" I said.

"Yes, I won her," he said with a bitter laugh. "And Ben, when we drove away on our honeymoon, says to me, 'You got her, Sam, an' good luck to you!' An' I thought it was mighty sporty of Ben."

"Well, we hadn't been married a month before I saw what I'd landed. Temper? By heck! An' a tongue to match it! It didn't matter I gave her no cause—that just seemed to aggravate her. By an' by it got so I couldn't do nothing to please her—it was nag, nag, from morning till night. An' I

began to guess why. Ben, he was coming often, evenings; he'd play checkers with me, and have supper with us, an' Katie was comparin' him with me an' my homely face an' quiet ways."

A rabbit popped from a hole a few yards away, sat up and eyed us audaciously, then leisurely began nibbling dandelion leaves. Sam watched it with listless eyes. Then he went on.

"Then one night down at Tony's poolroom, I hear Ben's got money left him an' a big ranch, from an old uncle up in Canada. I asked Ben the next evening he came up, and he said it was so. A pretty good chunk of money too; but he was staying on here for a bit. After that Katie got worse. Oh, boy, the rows! An' I knew why. She was mad now Ben hadn't come into his money sooner, an' with the unreasonableness of a woman, she was hatin' me for it.

"But I didn't think anything was wrong, till one night I came back from Little Rock where I'd been for a supply of groceries. It was deep snow and the old team made no noise as we drove into the yard. The kitchen lamp was lit and the window-blind was up—and there by the stove stood Ben and Katie. His arm was round her waist an' she was pretending to hold him off. Guess I oughta gone in an' kicked him out of the house then. But I always hated a scene, an' I knew Katie'd be more to blame than Ben. So I stabled the team and made a great noise kicking the snow off my boots. An' when I went in, there was the length of the room between them. But that night I spoke to Katie about it and that was the biggest row we ever had. By gum, she let loose on me, an' she ended up by saying she was glad to have one man about the place—meaning I was none.

"Well, I says firm-like, 'it's got to stop. I won't put up with it any longer.'

"Maybe you won't have to!" she said, a queer smile around her mouth.

"Next I hear, one night in Tony's, was—Ben's going to Canada to take up his uncle's ranch.

"You'll be plumb sorry to hear that," says one of the boys with a laugh. "You'll miss Ben."

"He'll maybe be missin' more'n Ben when he goes," says another, with a wink to the rest of the boys present.

"An' then I saw the whole place knew about Ben and Katie—seems Ben'd been boasting a bit when he had a drop of bootleg in him, an' everybody was talking and laughing about it. An' from one thing and another, by and by I got to know something else. When Ben went to Canada, Katie was going with him."

A little swarm of cotton-tails had come out to feed a dozen yards away. Sam watched them intently—and his gun lay at his feet.

"Yes, sir, they was all laughin'—the boys downtown and Katie and Ben, laughin' at me for a blind fool. But I wasn't the fool they took me for. No, sir! I had a plan, an' I was just layin' low.

"They laugh best that laughs last," I kept saying to myself.

"Well, the day Ben was to leave came near an', Jim, I could hardly wait for it. I couldn't work, nor eat, nor sleep, nor do nothin'. Ben and Katie couldn't have been more impatient for it to come. When it came at last—it was the day I always went for groceries—I drove the old buggy into Little Rock same as usual (for I'd said good-by to Ben). It was late when I got back; the house was all dark an' quiet, and when I went to the barn to put up the team, there was a letter pushed under the door where I'd get it first thing. It was from Ben."

And now I was startled at the change in the man by my side. Fumbling in a vest pocket he brought out a soiled and battered envelope and drew from it a sheet of yellowed paper. He stood

up, his whole body quivering, his face distorted with fury, his blue eyes blazing.

"I've kept it," he said, holding it out from him with trembling fingers, "kept it for the day I'll ram it down his throat—for the day he'll come up that trail an' I'll drive him down to the house before me at the point of that gun. Yes, sir, he bested me at the end after all, but some day he'll come back——"

Now I saw why Sam was called crazy. He was like a man demented.

"Sam," I said, "why didn't you sell out and leave the place? It would have been wiser."

"Sell off an' leave the place?" he said. "Why, boy, I couldn't. I gotta wait here—for Ben. Oh, he'll come back, the men of the mountains always come back."

I remembered this old tradition and that it was borne out by fact; and a great fear seized me that the final and most terrible chapter of Sam's life was not yet written.

"Anyway," I urged, giving the gun at my feet a vicious little kick, "leave that at home after this. Have you thought what it would mean if you were to shoot him?"

"Shoot him?" He lifted the gun and laughed softly. "No, boy, I've got something better than shooting for him when

he comes back to Big Bull Mountain."

"Well, whatever it is, put the idea from you. I admit," I hastened to add, "it's very natural you should want to get the man who took your wife from you——"

Then he flared suddenly.

"Took her! Why, Jim, you got it all wrong. That's it—he didn't take her! Bolted himself, the d—d skunk, an' left her to me, after all! That night I came home, Katie was up in bed, asleep—an' that's the letter I found under the barn door."

I read the sheet he pushed into my hand.

You've got her, old boy, and you're damn welcome to keep the shrew.

BEN.

"Sam-u-el!"

It was a woman's voice that came ringing up from the ranch—sharp and shrill, with a peremptory note in it.

Sam started nervously, and glanced down the hill.

"I gotta go. Katie don't like me long out of her sight," he said, hurriedly snatching the letter from me and pushing it back into the envelope. "Some day I'll be wantin' this—when Ben comes back——"

"Sam-u-el!"

But Samuel was already running downhill toward the little ranch.



THIS WAY OUT

By A. W. McKay

SOME day I'll drag out the family skeleton, and it'll tell the world that I have a right to be a man-hater if ever a girl did. But I was born with a sweet disposition and can't hate them as I ought to. When I see a poor defenceless man trodden on by the woman that promised to cherish and protect him, my nose is like as not to get shiny with indignation.

For instance, there was Clarence Smiley. Clarence owes his divorce to me, and he would be the first to admit it with tears of joy in his eyes.

If you want to know, and most people do, I'm the chic brunette that sells good and bad cigars in the smoke-shop of the Hotel Monmouth at our national capital. Some say I'm more popular than the Washington monument, though my career as a landmark has only, as you might say, just begun.

Anita DeCourcy assists me in upholding the elegance of the Monmouth, which would be just another hotel if it wasn't for us. There has to be two of us, not to mention Mabel Lacy who holds down the job in the evening because she was crossed in love, and thinks a date is something you get at a fruit stand.

Anita is a blonde and we're the best of friends, as close as three and four. We're room-mates too, so you may be sure we're both lovely girls. But there is one taste we don't have in common. Anita has reached the stage where she longs for a little bungalow, a man that will be practically her exclusive property, and anything else that might come along.

"I felt unplumbed depths of affection

welling up within me, Edyth," she said to me one evening when we were in *négligé*, and had no secrets from each other. "A little home with the man I love is all I ask of life, dearie."

That line about "unplumbed depths" was good, but the poor kid was serious, so I produced the soothing syrup.

"It's your digestion, honey," I told her. "You'll feel better in a day or two, and won't be so anxious to hand yourself a life sentence."

"To sit beside him when he came home in the evening, and smooth the tired lines from his forehead," Anita said, with an expression like a love-sick shad. "To think only of his comfort, to prepare his food with my own hands. . ."

"You're raving, dearie," I said. "Be yourself! What you're saying and my idea of nothing at all is the same thing."

But once they get that way there's nothing a person can do. It's a case for the coroner's jury.

But I've been rambling on about Anita and me, and forgetting all about Clarence Smiley. Well, Clarence is used to being forgot.

When I got Clarence Smiley on my hands, he had been married to Clarise almost three years. All this time Clarise, to hear her tell it, which she did frequently, had been a faithful and loving wife.

I had known Clarise since before Clarence fell for her, and she was all right as long as she got her own way. When she didn't, she could uncork a mean disposition.

Clarise craved affection and entertainment, and Clarence, though strong

on affection, was no Coney Island. He was at the office from eight to five, with overtime three nights a week, being the kind of boob who thinks hard work will get you something. So he did not shine in Clarise's social set, and the poor girl just had to have a man about.

What could she do but give Harry Redpath the be-my-little-playmate look? And Harry, being a boy who believed in signs, began trotting after her as if trained to it from his cradle. Clarence mildly said that he didn't think his own Clarise had ought to run about with another man. Then the fireworks started, and Clarence proved the old saying that all the ivory doesn't grow in Africa. He struck out with his bat on his shoulder is what I mean.

"All right," he said. "Just as you say."

That's the kind of a tame husband Clarence Smiley was. Honest, until I met him I thought they didn't grow like that. And if there's another, send him on to the Monmouth and let me see if he's good and true, or too good to be true.

After this little matter of Harry was decided, there passed some weeks when it would be hard to find a happier couple than the Smileys. At least Clarise was enjoying herself, and I never heard Clarence complain.

And then Clarise got Harry in such a state that alimony had no terrors for him. Having had Clarise on approval, he was agreeable to having her underfoot for life, more or less. Of course, there was Clarence to consider. Clarise, being more tender-hearted than some, didn't want to shoot him, though they do say there isn't any law against it, so somebody had to get a divorce. And to shield Clarise's lily-white reputation, Clarence had to do something to make her the wronged wife.

I'll tell the underworld, whether it wants to listen or not, that if I'd been Clarence, I'd supplied right then all the

grounds for divorce Clarise would ever need, and rubbed them into her alabaster brow. But Clarence listened meekly to the proposition that he steep himself in infidelity. Desertion wouldn't do, according to Clarise's idea, because she couldn't be deserted by agreement.

Then Clarence started out to hunt a wild woman with a pliable reputation, not knowing whether to look for her at the National Museum or an employment agency. Naturally, he turned to me for kindly advice. Now, it isn't giving Clarise any the worst of it to say that my own reputation is as spotless as hers, and Clarence was too much of a gentleman to suggest that I damage it for his sake. But I was receiving him in our apartment, with the lights turned low, and Anita gone for the evening, and it came to me that, if Clarise could drop in, the stage was set for a first-class scandal.

"You might stay here tonight, and we'd phone Clarise to drop in tomorrow morning with Harry and any other shocked bystanders needed," I said, more to see how he'd take it than anything else. A girl thinks she doesn't have to be careful with a fellow like Clarence, though one of them might fool you at that.

Clarence shuddered. "I couldn't think of such a thing, Edyth," he said, "even if Clarise did suggest it."

"Do you sit there and tell me that Clarise mentioned *me*?" I demanded.

Clarence admitted she had done that thing, and then I told Clarence, and any of the neighbors that were listening, my opinion of Clarise. I had just finished telling Clarence he was double-distilled, blown-in-the-glass boob to stand for Clarise's foolishness, when Anita came in, registering surprise.

I gave Anita an account of the events leading up to the tragedy. She was all helpful sympathy.

"And Clarise," said I, with outraged girlish indignation, "had the nerve to

suggest that I play the baby home-wrecker, with Clarence posing as the wreck!"

"I am much displeased with Clarise," Clarence said, talking in the funny high-brow way he has. "I am sure it was very selfish of her to suggest that either of you girls would consent to such an arrangement."

"Me!" Anita shrieked. "Did she mention me?"

"She did," Clarence admitted. "I shouldn't have told you, but since it slipped out about Edyth, it is just as well you should know that she mentioned you both."

Can you beat that? But I felt better to know that Anita's reputation wasn't any more holeproof than mine.

"We're both fallen women, dearie," I said to Anita.

"I'll get even with Clarise Smiley, if it takes me a million years!" Anita declared. "I knew that girl when she was the talk of Seventh Street. If she had a spotless reputation then, it was something she bought at a basement bargain-counter. You're lucky to get rid of her, Clarence."

"I suppose I am," said Clarence mournfully, "but I can't help feeling it is partly my fault. If I had only been different; a little more firm——"

"Nonsense!" Anita said. "She didn't appreciate you." And here, if my limpid orbs did not deceive me, she reached over and patted Clarence's hand. "You leave it to Edyth and me, Clarence," she said. "We'll find some way of making Clarise wish she had never insulted two honest working girls."

Clarence finally went on his way, cheered by our soothing chatter. I really liked the poor fish, and hated to see a strong woman pick on him. As for Anita, it did not take me long to discover that her ingrowing affection had fastened on Clarence, though, at that, she had a healthy desire to get even with Clarise.

"My heart bleeds for Clarence, Edyth," she said, when Clarise's discard had gone. "He's had rotten luck. If he had the right kind of a wife, he would be a famous man. I can feel it."

"A wife like you, dearie?" I inquired sweetly.

"Like me, or anyone but the doll-faced little simp he married," said Anita, permitting herself to speak the truth.

There was nothing to be said to that, and nothing to be done but to let nature take its course.

Anita put in a happy week worrying over Clarence, and Clarence seemed to like it. I wasn't surprised, when I got back to the apartment at a ridiculous hour for Saturday night, to find the two of them there and in the first throes of love.

"I have found true love, dearie," Anita said to me, all the time holding on to Clarence as if he might jump out the window.

I looked at Clarence, and he blushed and admitted the truth.

"You're a hero, Clarence," I said with my notorious tact. "Think of jumping into the frying pan before you're out of the fire, as they say in Swedish."

"Just what do you mean by these insinuations, honey?" Anita said with an angelic expression that told me that, though far gone in love, the dear child was still able to take her own part.

"Nothing, darling," I said. "I was talking in parachutes. You and Clarence can pull all the heavy loving you please with my blessing, if you enjoy the pastime. But what are we to do with the little wife? I mean, Clarence can't trade Clarise in for you like a second-hand flivver."

"I'm not a flivver!" Anita came back. "Not even a new one!"

"I really love Anita very much," said Clarence, interrupting what might have been another battle of the century, "and

there must be a divorce, of course, painful though it may be."

"Don't apologize," I told him. "It won't pain me, and Anita don't seem to be suffering. But Clarise is a sand-burr in the love nest, for a fact."

"Clarise wants a divorce," said Anita, "and I'm going to sacrifice myself. After all, it's not what the world thinks of you that counts, but the proof of the pudding is your own conscience. Clarence and I are going to be married, and he can't pull anything immoral with anybody but me."

Clarence made a gurgling sound, indicating great grief and gratitude.

"I cannot permit you to make this sacrifice for me," he said, though to me that had listened to her line about a little home and so forth, Anita's idea was just what you might expect. But as a Mah Jongg bug would say, it was like giving Clarise four East winds and a couple of East-end brickbats.

"You're a simp, honey," I said to Anita. "What you're doing will give Clarise a chance to look on you forever as something the cook threw away after dinner. There must be some way to make her the nanny goat."

"It's too late," Anita said. "I've already done the deed, Edyth. Clarise and Harry will break in here tomorrow morning at six o'clock, and find Clarence and me in embarrassment, or less. You'll have to beat it out of here about five-thirty, dearie, because it would be too respectable with you around."

"Six o'clock!" I rose to enquire. "Why the delay?"

"I don't know; I let Clarise set the date," Anita said.

"But what will we do with Clarence while the climax is climbing and the plot is getting sick?"

"I'll come back about the time Edyth leaves," Clarence offered helpfully, "but I wish we didn't have to do it."

The plan didn't make a hit with me, but everyone knows how I am—never

the one to spoil a friend's party. Still, it did seem that Clarise was getting away with murder, dropping in with Harry on a peaceful Sunday morning at six o'clock, and getting a nice, naughty thrill that would sound good to any judge. And how did it happen she could produce Harry at that time in the morning? From what I knew of Harry, he was more apt to be at the end of a perfect day at six a.m. (any morning), than starting a new one.

Then my well-worn brain punched the time-clock, and produced a new, shiny inspiration. Of the thousand and one bright and beautiful thoughts that I have thought in my time, it was the brightest and most beautiful.

"Six o'clock is a nasty hour to call on trusting lovers," I told my little playmates, "but two o'clock is downright devilish. Instead of waiting here for Clarise and Harry, let's call on them at two. Why shouldn't we go sight-seeing? It seems to be the fashion."

It was luck that Clarence still had a key to the apartment that once sheltered him and his true wife. What did we find there? Now listen, I'm a lady, whatever you are, and the blushes I blush don't all come from a drug store. But so nobody dies of unsatisfied curiosity, I'll say Clarise and Harry were as unsuspecting as I thought they would be. Clarence is getting a perfectly lovely divorce.

I think the dear boy could have had alimony too, if he had asked for it. But he was satisfied with Anita, whom he will soon follow into matrimony.

"I feel like I have more than one woman deserves," Anita told me, after the tumult had died away. "I have Clarence, and I have got even with Clarise for thinking I would blacken my character for her. It's things like that makes happy marriages, honey."

"You said it, dearie," said I, without a quiver of my languid lashes. "Nothing could be sweeter."

SILENCE, PLEASE!

By Dolly Ramseur

JACK HARRAH emerged from his suite at the Biltwell with Polly by his side. He was very conscious of his newly-wed state and very anxious not to appear so.

"I don't think any one will suspect, do you?" asked Polly. "While you were shaving, I polished your shoes and mine so that they don't look a bit new."

"We're safe, sweetheart," Jack agreed. In fact, at this moment he would have upheld Polly's judgment if she had championed the Reds or requested him to wear spats and a gray vest.

"Don't ask me at lunch if I like unsalted butter, and I'll try to remember that you take coffee without sugar," the bride rehearsed, and the young husband professed to be letter perfect in his rôle of domestic sophistication.

"By jingo!" Jack swore restrainedly under his breath. "There're Phil and Ruth at the elevator. Of all the luck!"

Polly gasped. "We'll just have to make the best of it," was her Spartan reply.

Phil and Ruth, also smartly dressed, wearing shoes brazenly unfamiliar with the disguising virtue of polish, did not appear overjoyed at the meeting.

"How did you happen to choose the same hotel?" Phil deplored.

"The Lord only knows!" Jack replied bitterly.

Then all laughed, and the four went down to lunch. Jack felt that it would take far more than an unfortunate coincidence to dampen his spirits to-day. Nevertheless a few minutes later, as the waiters were drawing back the girls' chairs, the poor youth saw a sight that struck new consternation to his soul.

"There's Quarterback Jones across the dining-room," he gasped.

"Yes, and he sees us," Phil groaned. "Let's bluff it out. The fact that we're together may ward off the give-away."

"Every cloud has its lining," Jack managed to say through dry lips, thinking at the same time how platitudes will roll from one's tongue under emotional stress.

There was no doubt, moreover, that Quarterback Jones recognized his college mates, for he gave his chair a kick much resembling those he had administered to rebounding pigskins, and, dodging tables that threatened to tackle, bolted towards goal.

"Where's your fellow drop from?" the football hero beamed, wringing the men by the hands until they winced in silent misery. "I'll bet you're on your honeymoons!"

"Wish we were, old chap," Jack began bravely. "I've been married two years and Phil about one. Polly and Ruth got so bored all of a sudden with domesticity that we had to bring them to New York for a lark."

"Here, girls, let me present our college chum, Mr. Jones," Phil interrupted, coming to in time to remember the amenities. "This queen is my wife, and the other is Jack's."

"Glad you're staying here," Quarterback breezed on. "I'll let you have your lunch now. See you later."

"Not if it can be helped," was Jack's ungrateful aside when the explosive Jones was out of hearing.

"Right you are!" Phil echoed.

"Let's take in a matinée this afternoon," Ruth suggested.

Jack bestowed upon Polly an imploring glance, but that young lady's beautiful eyes were unseeing.

"Fine!" she acquiesced. "Isn't it glorious to be where you can see and hear everything at once?"

Was Polly acting a part, or did she want to gad from one end of New York to the other to hear stupid music and see stupid acting? The question was utterly tormenting to Jack. But, in spite of the distress that clouded two male countenances, the *matinée* party was arranged, and tickets were purchased at the desk for the theatre that night.

Back in her room at five-thirty, Polly slipped into a ravishing *négligé* and loosened her rippling gold hair. Gazing at her, Jack could not find it in his heart to reprove. Instead, he took her in his arms and kissed her eyes, her throat, the curve of her lovely white shoulder; and, with his lips against hers, forgot that there was anything to mar the exquisite joy of possessing her.

"To-morrow we'll go to Atlantic City, where I can have you all to myself," he said, as Polly began to dress for dinner.

"That will be wonderful, Jack. I'm really as sorry as you are that we ran into Phil and Ruth. Whoever would have thought that such a thing could happen?"

"I know, dear. It did seem that taking different trains after the wedding would make us safe."

"And isn't it funny that both of us should have changed our directions and come to New York? It was silly to have a double wedding, but Ruth and I had planned it ever since we were tiny tots."

"Not silly at all," Jack soothed. "Perfectly natural, when Phil and I have always been such pals!"

"But wasn't it funny," Polly continued reminiscently, "that for such a long time Phil used to pair off with me?"

"Almost tragic," Jack rejoined vehemently, and again caught his wife in his arms. He found it hard to realize that

this lovely creature belonged to him—even when her lips clung to his, returning the ardor that raced through his veins. No other girl had ever had for him the blinding magnetism that simply *was* Polly. When he held her, he forgot everything, everything but the fragrance, the softness, the wild sweetness of her. It was always Polly that had to call him back from this ecstatic delirium.

"It's dinner time, darling," she reminded now, drawing her lips from his, "and Ruth and Phil will be waiting."

Always Ruth and Phil in a world that should be just Polly! Jack smoothed his black hair with both hands and straightened his tie.

"All right, sweetheart," he said resignedly.

At last the ordeal of dinner and the theatre was over, and the two couples sat in a taxi-cab on their way back to the hotel. Jack's arm stole surreptitiously around Polly and drew her towards him. Soon again he would be alone with her, all Ruth's chattering, all the noise of the city shut out and forgotten, his universe peopled with just Polly. As they entered the hotel lobby, Jack was pressing Polly's arm much too tightly, and he wondered if Polly could hear the glad pounding of his heart. Then he realized that she stood still and caught her breath in a frantic little gasp.

"Look!" she said. "The football fellow is waiting for us."

If St. Peter had at that moment barred before him the gates of heaven, Jack Harrah could not have been more miserable. He saw Ruth pale visibly and heard her whisper in a panic:

"Is it two years that Phil and I have been married, or one?"

"Lord, I don't know!" Jack heard Phil groan. "Let's all pretend we don't see him."

Knowing that there was no way to evade a football quarterback when goal was in sight, Jack set his jaw and prepared for the fray. Jones cleared a path

through the crowd and landed on both feet before the newlyweds.

"I've been waiting for you fellows," he announced. "They said at the desk that you had gone to the theatre."

Jones paused as though expecting some expression of appreciation. It was Polly who finally rose to the occasion.

"How sweet of you!" she crooned.

"I'm afraid you won't say that when you hear what's up," apologized the champion. "A stag party is scheduled for my room right now. Real stuff, too. All set, waiting for you fellows."

Jack sought Polly's eyes, and he knew that Phil sought Ruth's, but both young women were looking at Jones as unconcerned as though the wretch had been asking their husbands to play golf the next Saturday afternoon.

"We don't mind," Polly said sweetly.

"Of course not!" Ruth chimed in.

"Fine!" Jones congratulated. "Wives to be proud of! By the way, girls, you'd better lock your doors and take the keys out. There's no telling when the revellers will return. They can get other keys at the desk. I'll lead the way. See you girls to-morrow, I hope."

"We'll tell the clerk about the keys," said the thoughtful Ruth.

Jack held to Polly as though he feared he would never see her again, on his face a hopelessness beyond description.

"Go on, silly," Polly whispered. "If you don't, he'll suspect."

The quarterback, fairly exhaling contentment and self-approbation, left with the air of having scored, and Polly and Ruth went to the desk for their keys.

Be it said, moreover, to the grooms' credit—or discredit, as the point of view may interpret—that their spirits rose as Jones' refreshments began to flow. Back in Alberta, from whence Jack and Phil had come, supplies had long ago run low, leaving a brand the discreet man preferred to shun. Along with other permanent assets acquired at college, Jack and Phil had salvaged a taste for the best the

good god Bacchus had once bestowed in his bounty. Indeed, when the party finally broke up, Jack refused to believe that he was reading his watch aright. Guiltily he took Phil's arm, and the two friends steadied each other to the elevator and down.

"What'll Polly say?" moaned Jack.

"Wash yer face—drink water—we'll be all right," consoled Phil. "Let's stick our heads out-doors before we go to the desk."

The air did wonders. As Jack straightened his shoulders and walked with Phil across the lobby, he thought proudly that his capacity had not suffered because of the drought in Alberta.

"Keys to Mr. Harrah's and Mr. Adams' rooms, please," he said, leaning across the desk.

"What numbers?" asked the clerk.

"Phil, what's the number yer room?" Jack snapped.

"Damned if I know," came the complacent reply.

"Look 'em up. Always trust my wife's memory. Can't be bothered." Jack's air was quite lordly for one whose knees knocked together in a most annoying manner.

The clerk consulted the register and pulled two keys from the mail boxes.

"I'm Harrah. This is Adams," Jack prompted, took his key, caught Phil's arm and started towards the elevator. Consulting the metal tag in his hand, he directed the operator to stop at six. When the two men stepped out onto the velvet carpet, however, they hesitated.

"Sorter confused, aintja?" said the boy at the lever. "Lemme see yer keys—you go down the left, mister—you go down the right. Both 'bout midway."

Jack followed instructions, turning away from Phil. How well he walked! Of course, he wasn't drunk! How absurd for that idea ever to have occurred to him! Room numbers stood out quite clearly before his eyes. Through an open transom he could hear snoring—

possibly that of some tired travelling salesman. Through another came the sound of a watch ticking—or a clock—or was it his own watch? He made the turn successfully and steered his course down the hall to room 676. Strange he had forgotten that number a few moments ago! Everything, however, was much clearer now—he was feeling only a little shaky. Quietly he turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

Inside he saw that the suite was in darkness save for a pale glow that came from the bath-room. Of course, Polly was asleep. The poor darling! After the parties and excitement of the last few weeks, she needed all the rest she could get. Jack groped his way into the bed-room and began to undress in the dark—which was a bit modified by the light in the bath-room. Over a chair he saw something white. His pyjamas, of course! How like Polly to lay them out for him! As he stepped out of his clothes, Jack smiled to think how adept he was in the art of stealthiness. Guilty of no noise himself, he could hear the padded step of a bell boy in the hall and the click of ice against a pitcher. He could follow the measured breathing of the sleeping Polly, and as he listened, he knew that his own breathing came faster. He could even see in the almost darkness the rise and fall of Polly's breast beneath the night dress that he knew to be soft and dainty. Dimly he saw that one lovely arm was over her face and the other thrown across the pillow upon which soon his own head would lie.

Jack crept into bed beside his bride. For a moment he lay quite still, thrilled by the nearness of her, the fragrance of *quelques fleurs*, the velvety touch of that arm against his cheek. His Polly, his, his! He loved her! How sweetly she slept! She needed sleep, but he wanted to hold her close, to feel her heart beat against his. To love like this was agony—divine, excruciating, exquisite, unbear-

able! His lips touched the tips of her fingers, her arm. Then, despite his resolution, he drew Polly towards him, found her lips and pressed his against them. Everything faded from his memory except the realization that his sweetheart was in his arms. . . .

"Phil," the girl murmured.

Jack drew away in anguish. Had Polly not gotten over her affair with his friend? In her husband's arms, was she thinking of Phil? Then a more horrible alternative presented itself to Jack's befogged mind, and he placed his hand gently on the face of the girl by his side. Merciful saints, defend us! The nose was straight and according to the Grecian mould. Polly's adorable nose was decidedly *retroussé*. This was Ruth—not Polly! He must escape without being detected. His pal's wife! Was ever man in such a predicament?

As Jack gathered up his clothes and started to the sitting-room to dress, a more staggering realization fought through the daze of his consciousness. This minute Phil was with Polly! Infernal fiends! What was he to do? Furiously, stealthily he replaced part of the habiliments so recently taken off, gathered up the rest, and, almost entirely sobered, left the rooms. Did he remember the number of the key the clerk had given Phil? Yes, the elevator boy had said six-fifty-six. There could be no doubt. Stepping into the lighted hall, he was a moment getting his bearings. Then he found the elevator and followed the directions the boy had given Phil. He knocked on the door, first lightly, then louder. After an eternity or two, Phil, wearing Jack's pyjamas, cracked the door about an inch.

"Come outside," Jack whispered hoarsely, pushed the door open and pulled Phil through.

"Shut the door, man," he continued. "You've been in my room, and I've been in yours."

"Hell!" Phil exclaimed. "I undressed

THE SCARLET MAN

By Peggy Gaddis

CHARLES FRANCIS TOWNSEND was more than a bit of a prig—he was a hopelessly good young man in a world where goodness, particularly of his self-righteous, thoroughly-satisfied brand, had long ceased to be attractive to the casual eye. To make matters worse, he liked being good—was quite proud of his stainless record of never having touched liquor in all his pure young life, in knowing nothing of the curse of nicotine, save by heresay, and in disapproving thoroughly and heartily of modern women.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been quite so bad if he had looked the part—but he didn't. He was almost six feet tall, with a nice broad sweep of shoulders, with a pair of solemn, but rather nice brown eyes, and a shock of tumbled black hair. And, finally, he was what Betty Lee described as "sinfully, disgustingly and unnecessarily wealthy."

There may have been some slight excuse for his impossible goodness in the fact that he had been robbed of both parents in a ship disaster when he was three years old, and had been "inherited," as it were, by two maiden aunts, who had brought him up, with fluttering excitement, after a pattern of their own choosing. If ever there was a model young man, composed of virtues nowadays extinct, or at least decently concealed, Charles Francis Townsend was it. He always donned his flannels in October, and discarded them in May—because Aunt Patience had taught him to do so. Immediately after having been exposed to even a damp wind, he always had a hot bath and drank a hot lemonade, "to ward off the

chill," for Aunt Melissa had always insisted on this, and the habit had been so deeply ingrained that there was never any thought of changing.

To the younger set of Middleton, Charles Francis was anathema. It was nothing short of criminal, Betty Lee opined with passionate conviction, that any man who looked like Charles, and who had as much money as he had, should be such a hopeless "dud." There was a hidden, but none the less bitter hatred between these two. Betty delighted in tormenting Charles in every way that her fertile brain could conceive, and Charles would have resigned his membership at the Club, the only place where he ever met her, long ago, had it not been for the knowledge that no other course would have pleased her so much.

Aunt Patience and Aunt Melissa, as may well be imagined, were almost pathetically proud of "our big boy," as they affectionately called Charles, and it had been a sad blow to their hearts when he had chosen to have an apartment in down-town Middleton, instead of living on with them at the big, old-fashioned family mansion on Washington Road. They had rebelled, if one can imagine anything so meek and gentle and timorous as the little old Dresden china ladies doing anything so vigorous, against this action—until Aunt Patience had read in an English newspaper that the Prince of Wales did not reside in the "family residence" of the King and Queen, but maintained a separate establishment. After that, there was no more hesitation—they even went so far as to help him furnish the down-town apartment, and came in town, with much fluttering ex-

citement, once a week, to have tea with "the dear boy."

Charles practiced law and was, strangely enough, amazingly good at it.

"But," added Betty Lee, when she heard of it, "one couldn't imagine his being anything *but* good—disgustingly so—at anything he attempted." He was a model of perfection and Betty, being a thoroughly modern, up-and-at-'em young lady, hated perfection, especially of Charles' type, above all things.

And then the aunts found a fiancée for Charles—such a dear, sweet child, and so suitable! The young lady was twenty-seven, rather tall, extremely thin—she called it "willowy"—with a sallow complexion which she refused, loftily, to "insult" with rouge or powder. She wore thick-lensed glasses over her rather prominent, china-blue eyes, and was devoted to the classics. She spoke of "dear Lord Byron" as though he had been a bosom friend, but she delicately disapproved of some of the more—er—ardent passages in his works. This, then, was Alyce Calhoun, Charles' eminently suitable fiancée.

And so things stood on an afternoon in midsummer when Charles, crossing the velvety lawn of the Country Club to his parked car, ran headlong into a vision that startled him almost as much as a seven-headed dragon would have done. The vision in question was barely five feet tall, plumply rounded, every lovely, graceful curve of the beautifully formed body revealed with almost startling clarity by the bathing suit of flesh-pink silk that clung to the smooth skin as though it had grown there. The bathing suit, by the way, is called that by courtesy—it was scarcely larger than a man's pocket-handkerchief, but most men would have considered it entirely adequate, since works of beauty are so few that the more one could see of Betty Lee, according to most of the members of the Club, the better. Her bobbed blonde locks were damp, and clung to her

head in tiny ringlets such as a baby's hair shows, and her eyes, blue as larkspur, were dancing with mirth.

"Oh—I'm sorry," she laughed blithely, as she ran full-tilt into Charles. Then, as she drew back, and saw who it was, her whole expression changed, and she surveyed him coolly, one sun-tanned hand on her round hip, the other hand swinging her bathing cap nonchalantly.

"Oh—I don't know that I'm so sorry after all," she added.

"I should think," barked Charles, quivering with disgust—he assured himself that it *was* disgust—as his fascinated eyes followed the melting curves of her beautiful body, "that you would be sorry to have anybody at all see you—like that!"

Betty grinned up at him impudently.

"Oh—I don't know," she returned coolly, with a little spark of anger hidden in her eyes. "Why be stingy? I'm not—er—well, exactly hard on the eyes, you'll admit, perhaps—so why shouldn't I—go around like this if I want to?"

Charles started to pass her, without a word, but one strong, sun-burned hand shot out and gripped his arm with surprising strength.

"You don't like me, Charles Frawncis," she drawled easily. "Yet I've never done anything to you in all my life. *Why* don't you like me?"

"Because," snapped Charles rudely, "I don't like any woman who so far forgets her natural modesty and decency as you do."

Betty gasped as though he had flung cold water into her face, but she managed a game little grin.

"I suppose—Alyce Calhoun—wouldn't wear a bathing suit like this," she mused, aloud.

Charles flushed at the mere thought.

"Certainly not!" he retorted shortly.

"No," agreed Betty kindly. "Alyce wouldn't *dare*! There are two reasons why Alyce wouldn't dare. There are really more than two, but I'm too much

of a lady, little as you might suspect it, to mention more than two. Want to know what those two reasons are, big boy? Be a sport. Ask me what two reasons there are why Alyce—with a 'y'—wouldn't wear a bathing suit like this!"

Charles glared at her angrily—but curiosity is not wholly a feminine trait, and he waited to be told the reason why his fiancée would not appear in public in a postage-stamp edition bathing suit.

Betty stood straight suddenly, slim legs together, spread her hands, and looked down at the smooth, shining limbs, round and soft, beautifully shaped—a pair of legs that one of Mack Sennett's bathing girls might have envied.

"Alyce, you see, is knock-kneed," she explained sweetly. "As I said, there are other reasons, as well!"

And the young imp, standing straight and round as a young birch tree before him, slid her hands significantly along her beautiful body—and, as in a vision, Charles had a horrible picture of Alyce, thin, angular, sallow-skinned, in this girl's place, inadequately covered with a scrap of pink silk.

His face whitened a little, and his eyes grew desperate. Betty flung back her head and opened her red mouth, emitting a peal of tinkling laughter that rasped on Charles' strained nerves. He flung himself away from her, into his conservative, black-painted roadster, and for the first time in his life, drove more than twenty miles an hour, home.

Back at the Club, Betty stood where he had left her, and her blue eyes narrowed, darkened, every spark of amusement gone, the corner of her red mouth clenched between small, strong white teeth.

"It's just about time, big boy, that something happened to you," she told his departing car. "And I don't know of a better person to give you what's coming to you than me, myself, in per-

son, Betty Lee! So step aside, and watch my dust. I'm going to 'get you' and 'get you' good."

Charles bent over his desk, his papers spread before him, all the lights in the room burning brightly. It was a warm night, and, for comfort, he had changed to his pyjamas as a working costume. There was no sound in the room, save for the hopeful buzzing of some tiny insect that had made its way into the apartment, and was quite determined to commit suicide if it could only work its way into the glass bulb that covered the mysterious light that had lured it.

And then, though the hour was close to midnight, the door-bell pealed loudly, agitatedly. Charles looked up, astonished. Surely it must be a mistake. A caller at this hour? But the bell pealed again, and forgetful of his *dishabille*, Charles crossed the living-room and opened the door.

What was his amazement to find Aunt Patience and Aunt Melissa, white-faced, agitated, backed up by a tall, broad old gentleman with fierce mustaches, and a belligerent expression.

"Why, Aunt Patience! Aunt Melissa! What on earth are you doing in town at this hour?" cried Charles, as the two little old ladies fluttered past him into the room, pretending determinedly not to notice his night-attire.

The old gentleman was hardly so courteous, however.

"Young man, where is my niece?" was his first, and astounding question.

Charles stared at him, goggle-eyed.

"Your niece?" he repeated idiotically. "Why ask me? I didn't even know you had one!"

The old man waved his heavy cane menacingly.

"Young man, don't you try to 'smart Aleck' me!" he thundered.

"Colonel Hopkins, please be patient," begged Aunt Melissa, more concerned than Charles had seen her in years. "We tried to tell you that it was all

some terrible mistake—but you wouldn't listen!"

"And I have no intention of listening now!" thundered the old man. "I've come for my niece. I'm convinced that she is here, and it'll do you no good, young man, to lie to me!"

Charles flushed hotly.

"I don't know what you are talking about!" he snapped resentfully. "And I assure you that I haven't the faintest intention of lying! If you'll be good enough to tell me why you look for your niece here—and, in the first place, who your niece is,—we might be able to get somewhere!"

"My niece is Betty Lee," said the old man, restraining himself with a visible effort that purpled his face. "I've been advised that she—er—is in the habit of spending the evening here with you—that she is here to-night—and I've come for her."

Charles was, for the moment, speechless, both with amazement and anger. That his pure, austere bachelor apartment should be suspected of harboring a woman, any woman at all—but that that woman should be Betty Lee, of whom he disapproved more violently than of any woman he had ever met—it was quite too much, and he choked on a too vigorous reply.

"I told you, Colonel, that the whole matter was absurd," said Aunt Melissa, with a sort of meek spirit. "But you *would* come! Your insinuations are an insult to our dear boy!"

"Then if my niece is not here, you won't object to my taking a look around? If I fail to find her, I'll apologize any way you please," snapped the old man.

"That you should doubt my word is sufficient insult," said Charles loftily, and was a little dissatisfied with the sound of the words. "But you are at liberty to search the apartment, if you care to do so."

The Colonel flushed at the contempt in the words, but was doggedly determined

to see for himself that his niece was not in the apartment. There was a few moments' silence as the Colonel left the room, the two women and Charles sitting stiffly in the living-room.

Suddenly there was a roar of rage from the direction of the bedroom, followed by a little feminine squeal of terror. The aunts and Charles, hurrying across the room, stopped in the door of the bedroom, and it is doubtful if the aunts felt half as much consternation at the sight that met their eyes as Charles.

For there, sitting up in bed—in his great, dark, mahogany bed—in a night-dress of frailest, thinnest white chiffon, one flowery pink strap escaping its duty and trailing over her arm, revealing a glimpse of smooth white skin, sat Betty Lee, blue eyes wide and tear-filled, her face white.

Aunt Melissa emitted a little gasp of horror, Aunt Patience, who was younger and more giddy, screamed, and the Colonel turned on Charles, with blood and murder in his eyes.

"So you didn't know my niece, eh?" he thundered. "So she isn't in the habit of spending the evening here? You—you—young whelp, I've half a mind to cane you!"

"I give you my word," sputtered Charles, indignantly, "that I didn't know she was here! Why, I *barely* know her!"

"*Barely!*" The Colonel's glance took in, with an insulting significance, the girl's fragile night-dress, with its beautiful, if rather startling, revelations, and Charles' forgotten pyjamas. The aunts gasped in unison, as they caught the glance. "Yes—I think '*barely*' is the word!"

"Charles, honey—there's no use arguing with him any more," pleaded Betty tearfully, holding out round, white arms, begging dumbly for the comfort of Charles' arms about her. "They've got us—dead to rights. We might as well admit it."

Charles stared at her, big-eyed with dumb amazement. His brain was whirling, he was gasping like a fish. What in the name of all that was merciful was this girl doing here, at night, in his bed, in such garb? And how did her uncle know where to find her? His aunts, too—they were horrified beyond measure, their faith in him wrecked.

Betty, sensing his bewilderment, took things into her own hands, and faced her uncle furiously.

"Well? What more do you want?" she snapped savagely. "I'm of age—you can't control me. What business is it of yours that I am here, alone, with Charles? Please understand, if it will interest you to know it, that I am here to-night with Charles, as I have been many times this summer, of my own free will! And now we'd both appreciate it if you'd all get to hell out of here!"

The little aunts, beyond the point of being shocked any further, covered their outraged ears with their hands, and fled weeping, shaken to the core by this blow to their pride in "our dear boy." The Colonel retreated also, blustering and swearing, but defeated by the hard-eyed girl who faced him so shamelessly from the disordered covers of the big mahogany bed. When the door had closed behind the three of them, Charles strode back into the bed-room, red rage in his eyes—the most wholesome, because the most vigorous emotion that had ever shaken him.

"Now, see here, young woman, will you please be kind enough to explain the meaning of all this?" he demanded.

Betty leaned back on her propped arm, making no effort to replace the straying shoulder strap, her head tilted back a little, staring at him through narrowed eyes, a small smile playing about the corners of her lovely mouth.

"You mean explain what they are thinking—or what is really true?" she asked lazily.

She leaned forward and rummaged among the things on the small bedside table.

"Where do you keep your cigarettes, big boy?" she asked, after a moment.

"I never smoke them. Therefore, I never have any of them here," returned Charles, a little breathless with the whirl of events, his fascinated eyes on the bit of smooth white flesh revealed by the truant strap.

Betty grinned a little.

"You overlooked a fine chance to call them 'the vile weed,'" she commented, and glanced up to catch his eyes on her bare shoulder. She colored ever so faintly and drew the strap back into place, and Charles dragged his eyes away, a little giddy with the thrill that shot through him at the sight of her ever so slight confusion.

She studied him with frank curiosity, her knees drawn up, encircled by her bare arms, her chin resting on her knees.

"You don't smoke, you don't drink, you don't gad about with wild women. Say, what excuse do you find for living, anyway?" she demanded unexpectedly.

"Those things don't interest me," said Charles, angry because he felt the need of apologizing for a way of living that had always been its own excuse.

"I know it, you poor thing," said Betty commiseratingly. "That's why I asked you what excuse you had for living. Where do you get any kick out of life? Surely not out of the fair—and angular—Alyce."

"Please leave my fiancée's name out of the situation," said Charles stiffly. "You doubtless had some good reason for coming here to-night, for—er—disrobing and occupying my bed. For some unknown reason, it seems to have pleased you that your uncle and my aunts found you here. But now that they have gone and that your reputation is smashed to bits, perhaps you will be good enough to go!"

Betty flung back the covers of the bed and slid out, resting her small bare feet in the soft rug at the side of the bed. The gesture was so unconscious, she was so patently unaware of him as a man, that nothing could have stung him harder. There was a bewildering flash of rosy curves, of melting marble whiteness and delectable dimples, as she put up her arms and yawned childishly. The best that could be said of the white chiffon nightdress which she wore was that its fairness flattered her milky skin. It concealed very little, adding its seductive revelation to her youthful lure. He felt the blood mount hotly in his veins, and there was a queer, singing murmur in his brain.

Quickly, so quickly that the girl could not move to circumvent him, he caught her in his arms, and held her against him so closely that he could feel the quick, startled rise and fall of her small white breasts against him, as she caught her breath. For a moment, the ghost of fear showed in her blue eyes, as she met the burning gaze of his brown ones, in which new flames danced.

And then she did the one unexpected thing that she could have done—she flung back her head, and laughed—a laugh of genuine, if somewhat shaky amusement. He scarcely knew whether to release her, or to hold her more closely—and so he stood, feeling more of an idiot than he had ever felt in his life, holding her rather limply.

"You're so—f-funny," she stuttered, her utterance choked with mirth. "Imagine Charles Frawncis, who disapproves of everything that lives and breathes, trying to be cave-mannish! It's too much!"

Clumsily, he essayed a kiss, more in the hope of stifling that mirth than of anything else—and was surprised again, when she struck him hard with her small, clenched fists, and tore herself free of his arms.

"Don't you *dare* try to kiss me!" she

snapped savagely. "I give my kisses where I like—but no man takes them unless I'm willing! And even then, he must be a *man*, not a weak-kneed jelly-fish—a sister Nancy like you!"

She flung open the door leading into the living-room.

"Get out!" she ordered briefly, and the contempt and anger in her tone was like a whiplash. Like a yellow pup who has just been kicked, Charles, a by no means heroic figure in his pyjamas—what man *could* be?—almost crept from the room, and was rewarded by hearing the door slam behind him, and the key turn in the lock.

He waited, his mind seething with the whole amazing, incredible evening. When she came out, dressed, he would make her explain, make her tell him the whole thing. But he grinned, a little sickly, at the thought of his *making* Betty Lee do anything. He doubted that anybody could!

But when an hour had passed, and another, and there was no sign of life in the other room, he knocked timorously. There was no answer, and he knocked again—finally turning the knob of the door, which opened readily. The room was deserted, but a curtain, swaying gently in the night wind, gave a clue to the girl's disappearance. Down the fire-escape, of course—probably the way she had entered!

He went to bed after a while—but not to sleep, for the pillow bore a strange, new, faint fragrance that was oddly disturbing. The little hollow where her round young body had lain aroused his imagination; when he closed his eyes, he saw again the loveliness of that vision which had faced him when he and the aunts had stood on the threshold of the room, and had seen the girl sitting up in bed, facing her uncle. She had confessed to her uncle and the two aunts that she had been carrying on a—er—his mind stumbled over the word—liaison with him all summer! And he barely

knew the girl—only well enough to disapprove of her thoroughly.

What would Alyce think of the situation? She would be shocked to the core of her virgin heart, of course. Would she ever believe him, when he told her the truth? With a sinking heart, he told himself that she would not—indeed, who would? It was an incredible thing—that a girl should confess such a thing that was untrue! A confession of that sort, if it had been true, would have been bad enough—but nobody would believe that a girl like Betty Lee would confess to having had an affair that had progressed beyond the point of discretion, with a man—unless it had been true.

It did not, of course, occur to Charles that the tale of that nocturnal adventure would ever creep forth. The aunts, he knew, would hold their own counsel, feeling that he had dropped an ineradicable blot on the 'scutcheon of the family honor by entertaining a young lady in his apartment over-night—and a young lady, moreover, who brazenly confessed that it was not her first appearance there.

He therefore quite naturally concluded that the doughty colonel, Betty's uncle, would be as loth to reveal the secret shame that had fallen upon his house as would the aunts.

But Charles Francis Townsend, being more than a bit of a prig, felt that it was incumbent upon him to play the part of a gentleman. He had, no matter how innocently, compromised a lady—though he privately considered Betty a "young person," rather than a lady. There was but one course open to a man who had compromised a lady, provided that man was a gentleman. And, with a sneaking enjoyment of his feeling of martyrdom, Charles indited an epistle—one could never imagine Charles merely "writing a letter"—to Betty.

After considerable thought and a number of false starts, this is what he mailed:

"My dear Betty:

"Inasmuch as our families have seen fit to suspect us of a crime against the family honor, I feel it my duty to ask you to be my wife. There can, of course, be no question of love in such a proposal, but I shall do my best to be a good husband, and I offer you the protection of my name. Will you please let me have your answer by return post?"

"Yours very truly,

"CHARLES FRANCIS TOWNSEND."

The letter posted, he felt much better, and went down to his office with redoubled enthusiasm for life in general. If, now and then, a rosy vision of Betty in the gossamer night-dress with the fluttering, flowery ribbons obtruded itself, he denied—or strove to deny—the thrill it gave him, and tried to assure himself that he was very much upset and heart-broken at having to give up Alyce in favor of the deliciously moulded Betty.

The answer to his letter came the next morning. Betty had returned his own letter, with a few changes—chiefly a clever drawing by which she had transformed the large, flowing, graceful capital "C" with which he had begun his name into a droll little figuré, by printing dots inside the circle for eyes, nose and mouth, drawing lines that represented a distinctly attenuated body. And, scrawled across the face of the letter, in heavy blue pencil, was the admonition:

"Dear Charles: Don't be a sap!"

He was surprised when he saw the answer that she had sent him. He had expected her to say "yes," to thank him humbly for saving her reputation. He had expected to feel very unhappy and down-hearted when he heard her "yes"—he had expected to grieve because he would have to give up the angular Alyce—but, instead, when he read the gay little admonition that told him "no," he

felt perfectly wretched. The very memory of Alyce filled him with acute distaste. Involuntarily, he wondered how Alyce would look in a night-dress of airy chiffon and blossomy ribbons and caught himself up, shocked and startled at the trend of his own thoughts.

During the next few days, Charles Francis Townsend had the shock of his life. His first appearance at the Country Club, following that amazing, incredible nocturnal escapade of the amazing Betty, was greeted by amused, half-hidden smiles, lifted eyebrows. The men looked at him with a new respect, a touch of envy, and a suggestion of considering him a bit of a dog. The women eyed him with new favor, but a little wary, as though they found him interesting, but a man to be feared.

At first, he couldn't account for it, but when one Bubba Hawkins, who was prone to look upon the moonshine when it was white, the Club boot-legger's best customer, hailed him in the locker-room, it was made distressingly plain.

Bubba dug a festive elbow into Charles' astounded ribs, winked slyly, and said in a stentorian whisper:

"Say, you're a wise bird, Charlie, old boy. Always heard that still waters run deep—but damme, you're deeper than that!"

Charles drew back with a touch of well-known hauteur.

"What do you mean?" he snapped rudely.

"Oh, 'sall right, 'sall right, old fellow," said Bubba, shaking a waggish forefinger under Charles' nose. "We heard about the li'l lady you been entertaining in your bachelor apartments! 'At's a good one, 'at is—bachelor apartments! Dam' 'f I don't try to find an apartment there myself. I could do with a little—er—"bachelor entertainment' myself—but my wife won't allow it."

"I don't know what you are talking about," snapped Charles, but his color, as well as his choler, gave him away.

"Cern'ly not! Don't blame you a bit!" agreed Bubba emphatically. "Stick to your story, old fellow. Nobody'll believe you, but a gen'elman always lies when a lady's name is mentioned."

Charles tore his coat rudely from the other man's grasp and strode through the hall, and out to the wide verandah. On the steps outside, he came face to face with Lydia Murray, one of the most fascinating women at the Club, a noted siren who had disposed of three husbands through the medium of the divorce courts, and was quite willing to take on another. Lydia was superb in creamy white, with artful touches of black, one great scarlet rose half-hidden beneath the brim of her wide black hat lending color to her smooth, creamy cheeks.

Now Lydia had never consented to recognize Charles' existence until now, but, as they came face to face, she stopped and smiled up at him, her long brown eyes dancing a little.

"Naughty boy!" cooed Lydia charmingly. "To think we never suspected you of being anything but a book-worm, and a bit dull! How you must hate us for so cruelly misunderstanding you!"

"I must confess," said Charles shortly, "that I don't know what you are talking about!"

"So!" murmured Lydia, with a deepening smile. "Then forgive my—crudeness. But you must come over to dinner some time, at my little place. What about to-morrow evening? I think I can promise you that it will be—quite amusing!"

"Thank you," said Charles. "I'll be delighted, of course."

Upon which feeble lie he made his escape.

But he found that the story had gotten abroad on the wings of rumor, and the effects of the story were far-reaching. Alyce sent for him, and with a tearful, dramatic scene, the memory of which Alyce was to cherish forever

after, as her one blighted romance, gave him up—"so that he might be free to offer the cloak and protection of his name to the girl he had—seduced."

Charles blushed more violently than Alyce herself at the sound of that word, and said hotly:

"But she doesn't want to marry me—I've asked her!"

Alyce flinched at the unconscious admission of his guilt contained in those thoughtless words, and, had Charles known a little more about women, he would have known at that moment, that he could have Alyce back, with a little judicious wooing. But then, if Charles had known a little more about women, perhaps he wouldn't have been in this predicament at all. So he departed, with the really beautiful engagement ring that had adorned Alyce's thin finger tucked in his vest pocket, and a new, unexpected, rather startling feeling of freedom about his heart.

But if this result had its pleasant aspect, there were others that did not. Old Squire Enderby, one of the richest—and stingiest—men in the county, whose business Charles had handled for years, and which had been one of his greatest sources of income, sent for him, faced him with the story, and, when Charles, painfully truthful, had been unable to save himself, Squire Enderby had informed him that he would have no "conscienceless libertine" handling his affairs. Little old Miss Martin, whose business didn't amount to a great deal, but who had upheld Charles as one of the shining lights of the legal profession and a man who was "a tower of truth and honor" tearfully took her business away from him; men whom he detested, and whom he had given a wide berth in the old days, now felt themselves privileged to hang over his desk by the hour, telling foul stories—Charles thought them foul—and smoking up his office until he could barely endure the atmosphere. At the Club, the older,

more substantial, more conservative men—men of families, for the most part—with whom he had formerly gone around the links, with whom he had sat in the locker room, discussing politics and the like, now passed him by with a cool glance, while the objectionable element, of which Bubba Hawkins was typical, flung themselves upon him with joy, envying frankly his secretiveness in handling his "*affaires de coeur*." And the "flappers," with their frankly revealing gowns, their bobbed hair, and heavy coats of rouge, swarmed about him until he grew desperate.

Betty Lee he saw occasionally, but she always gave him a merry, teasing glance from limpid blue eyes, and danced out of his vision. He hadn't had a chance to talk to her since that amazing night until, on a certain Saturday night, he attended the weekly dance at the Club. That, in itself, was an unheard-of thing, but Lydia Murray took it as a tribute to her powers of persuasion, and adopted such a proprietary air towards him that a speculative look dawned in Betty's blue eyes.

Lydia, more seductively charming than ever to-night in a gown of creamy Chantilly lace, with a low, crushed girdle of softest, palest green about her hips, her hair done low on her white neck, was dancing with Charles, who was amazed to find himself a fairly good dancer—amazed, since no woman as clever as Lydia will ever let a man know that it is she who is leading, guiding the steps, with a slim, soft arm about his shoulders.

Betty, who looked about fifteen in a childish dance-frock of pale blue chiffon, and an old-fashioned nosegay of tiny pink rose-buds, watched them for a moment. She looked at Lydia's carefully applied rouge, at the tiny, faint lines at the corners of Lydia's eyes, at the ever-so-faint little "salt-cellars" in her throat—and grinned wickedly.

"I thank a just and merciful heaven,"

said Betty to herself, "that I got myself up to-night to look like 'Elsie herself.' It will help me do something the writer of the Elsie books would have died before she would even have contemplated."

Betty's work was adroit—but not clever enough to keep Lydia from sensing it. But it worked, and a few moments later Lydia was dancing with Tom Hodges, a tall, gangling youth who adored Lydia with a deathless passion, as strong as it was hopeless; and Charles was leading Betty from the room, "for some air." There wasn't any air on the terrace or the lawn apparently. It was necessary for Charles and Betty to proceed all the way to Charles' car, parked in a nice, secluded spot.

Betty climbed in and looked about her.

"I'll wage a lead nickel that you didn't think of this parking place all by yourself," she remarked sagely. "It bears all the ear-marks of being a bit of 'lureful Lydia's' fine Italian hand."

Charles cleared his throat and looked down through the dim light, at the round, white beauty of the girl who sat demurely beside him. Could it be possible that he had ever disapproved of this girl, who looked almost too pure and saintly in her cornflower blue dress, to listen to the words of earthly love? What a dolt he had been!

"See here, Betty," he began impressively. "I brought you out here because I have something to tell you!"

Betty smothered a giggle. The poor innocent fish! *He* had brought *her* out here! When the idea and its performance had been wholly her own. Still, Betty, being wise in the ways of the opposite sex, contrived to look very young and sweet and helpless.

"Yes, Charles," she murmured sweetly.

"You've got to marry me, Betty," blurted Charles desperately. "You've simply *got* to—that's all! It's the only possible thing to do!"

Betty sat up straight, and stared at him through narrowed lids.

"This is 1924, Charles—not 1776," she snapped. "I'll have you know that my reputation hasn't been damaged to that extent! No sane woman's is, nowadays!"

"Your reputation?" snapped Charles hotly. "I'm not thinking of *yours*—I'm thinking of *mine*!"

Betty gasped and stared.

"Your reputation?" she repeated. "Good heavens—has something happened to it?"

"Happened to it?" Charles groaned at the inadequacy of the words. "It's damned near ruined! People have learned that I am in the habit of entertaining young ladies over-night in my apartment—I've lost three of my best clients, a perfectly good fiancée, and a number of friends—and the landlord is threatening to cancel my lease! It's all your fault, and it's up to you to marry me!"

For a long moment, Betty stared at him stunned. But she saw that he was in dead earnest—and suddenly, the full humor of the situation dawned upon her. The complete reversal of the most hackneyed situation known to the world struck her as the most delicious bit of humor she had ever encountered. Here was a man pleading with a girl that she had compromised him—had so battered his reputation that the only thing possible was for her to marry him! Suddenly, Betty flung back her head and laughed, peal after peal of delicious laughter sprinkled the air.

Suddenly, her laughter was stilled as Charles, his face white, a little set, caught her in his arms, crushing her hard against him, and set his mouth, with almost savage force, on those parted, laughing lips. He held her so for a long moment, until every breath of laughter was stilled, and a little tremor that was half fear, half delight, quivered through the girl. Charles' nerves were none too steady, though their agitation was rather puzzling to his usually clear, analytical brain.

He put her a little away from him, and they stared at each other, wide-eyed, startled, as the first man and first woman must have been when vision was given them with which to behold each other clearly.

"Why," he stammered. "I believe I'm in love with you!"

Betty smiled, a tremulous little smile.

"Do you really?" she murmured shyly.

"You'll marry me, Betty?" he pleaded.

"To—save your reputation?" she questioned.

"To save my life," he retorted sentimentally—and meant it.

Betty hesitated, and pretended a vast absorption in an imaginary bit of fluff on his shoulder.

"I'm hesitating between answers," she told him finally, frankly. "I *could* say that I had—I loved you all along and that I meant to marry you from the first. Or I could tell you that I don't love you at all, but that I'd take a sporting chance on matrimony with you. But neither would be the truth, and, somehow, for no known reason, I have a keen desire to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So I'll tell you that I didn't love you at the first—I detested you—you were so utterly, impossibly good that you made everybody uncomfortable, just to be around you. You disapproved so loftily

of every human thing that I thought it was just as well that you had a lesson. And I gave you one. Later on, I whispered the truth of that night to one of my best friends under oath of secrecy, and before the next afternoon it was all over town, quite as I knew it would be. That suited my purpose splendidly—but then I began to be sorry for you. I didn't know I had really—spoiled your reputation or hurt your business, though—I'm awfully sorry about that, really! I just meant it for a joke that would cut some of your conceit, and make you more human. You know, Charles, you are painfully conceited!"

Charles winced, flushed, but took the blow like a man.

"I've heard that the one sure cure for conceit in a man, is a wife," he told her hopefully.

"Well, you're going to have a wife, darling, who will do everything she can to help you get over that fault," promised Betty firmly.

But the way she melted into his arms and lifted her lovely red mouth for his kiss seemed to argue that, since marriage is at best a gamble, they would both be fairly good gamblers, with an intense interest in the game to aid their playing of it!

And, after all, that's really about as much as any normal, sane, human being ought to expect, at that!



ACE IN THE HOLE

By George Jordan

THE Fat Man looked up from his newspaper, a gleam of interest in his small eyes. He was a friendly sort. Pullman car smokers were his most natural habitat. The loan of a match was sufficient to make a bosom comrade of him and start him off on the story about the cigar salesman and the innocent little country girl. If he didn't have anybody to tell dirty stories to, he told them to himself. His moist hand was at no time so at home as when slapping someone on the back. Been around, too! Umm! New York? Sure. Ladies? Well! A sly wink disposed of that question.

He looked up from his newspaper with a gleam of interest in his eyes, as he saw the Young Fellow preparing to draw up a chair beside him on the veranda of the big resort hotel. He was always bored with his own company. He wasn't the only one; but he would have been the last to realize it. Fellas liked him, he was in the habit of saying.

"Great day," he started off, as the Young Fellow, who looked as though he might be an undergraduate from some university, settled down in his chair.

He received no answer.

He fumbled in his pockets for a moment, then turned again to the newcomer.

"Got a match?"

The Young Fellow looked at him coldly, without expression. Without a word, he drew a package of matches from his pocket, handed them to the Fat Man.

The latter relit his stub of a cigar, returned the matches.

"Thanks," he grunted. "Been down long?"

"No."

Pause.

"Should think a young fellow like you would be down on the beach, afternoon like this."

No answer.

"Do you swim?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"Lots of good lookin' girls out. Ought to be good pickin' on a day like this."

Silence.

The Fat Man grunted; leaned his elbows on the railing of the veranda. Of all uncommunicative guys, this fellow won the prize. He looked disconsolately out over the beach.

Suddenly he whistled—softly—a long-drawn-out whistle of appreciation.

"Boy, oh, boy!" he said, turning to the Young Fellow. "If that ain't a pippin, I never saw one."

An extremely beautiful woman, exquisitely formed, and clad in the flimsiest of silk bathing suits, had made her appearance on the beach.

The Young Fellow narrowed his eyes slightly. He too had seen the Woman, had been impressed by her beauty. He was finding the lustful appreciation of the Fat Man decidedly distasteful.

"Woman with looks like that'll never have any trouble getting along in this world," continued the Fat Man. "Gosh, now, I'm tellin' you, ain't she stacked up just about right now?" He looked at her speculatively. "That's the kind of dame for me. None of these saucy little flappers for mine when I want to go out on a party."

For the first time, the Young Fellow took an interest in the conversation.

"Do you think you could pick her up?" he inquired.

"She'd be darned expensive," admitted the Fat Man. "Easy enough to pick her up, but a fella'd have to show plenty of the long green before he'd make any headway with her."

"Funny now," responded the Young Fellow. "She doesn't look to me like the kind who would pick up."

The Fat Man looked at him patronizingly.

"When you've been around as much as I have you'll be able to spot 'em," he said.

"Oh!"

"Yep! They look haughty enough—the expensive ones. It's just a pose. Brings 'em in more dough."

The Young Fellow looked at the Woman thoughtfully, and then turned to the Fat Man.

"Well, I don't think you could pick her up. You've been around a lot, and all that, I know, but you're mistaken in that woman."

The Fat Man looked at him quizzically.

"Like to make a little bet on it?" he said.

The Young Fellow took a final inspection of the Woman, then appraisingly looked at the Fat Man.

"Yes," he said. "I'll bet on it."

The inference was not lost on the Fat Man. He flushed angrily.

"How much do you want to bet?"

"Anything you want to say."

"I don't make piker bets," insinuatingly.

The Young Fellow took this in silence. Finally:

"Would a hundred dollars interest you?"

The Fat Man regarded him keenly.

"All right," he snapped. "If I haven't made her by midnight, you win."

"Righto!"

"We'll put the money in an envelope and give it to the clerk with instruc-

tions to give it to neither of us unless he is accompanied by the other."

"Righto!"

The Fat Man and the Young Fellow walked into the lobby of the hotel, preparing to put up their stakes.

The Woman, unmindful of the wager which was being made as to her accessibility, lay comfortably on the beach, stretching out her beautiful figure in the warm rays of the summer sun. More than one man paused to take another glance at her, even turned back in his promenade for the purpose of getting another view. Calmly, serenely, she lay, sunning herself like a lazy cat.

The Young Fellow sat patiently in a big, comfortable chair on the mezzanine floor of the hotel.

The big clock over the desk downstairs pointed to half after eleven.

Shortly before twelve he was joined by the Fat Man. Somehow or other, the latter didn't look so fat, so big, as he had in the afternoon. He seemed to have shrunk within himself.

He looked sourly at the Young Fellow.

"You win the bet all right," he said. "But you're lucky."

"Oh, weren't you able to make her acquaintance?"

"Nah," disgustedly. "I didn't get any tumble on the beach, but I thought she was just stallin'."

"Did you try again?"

"You're darned right I did! When she went up to her room, I followed her. Stuck around outside her door and made a lot of noise. That usually works. But nothin' doin'. Finally, I knocked on the door. When she saw me, she slammed the door in my face, and I heard her go to the telephone. So I beat it into a linen closet in the hall. Sure enough, in a minute up comes the house detective. But he didn't catch me, the big dumb-bell."

The Fat Man paused in his recital, and a bitter look came into his face.

"When I got downstairs, I found out what was the matter with her. She's scared. That's the trouble. The guy that's keepin' her is expected to blow in any minute, the clerk told me."

"Oh!" said the Young Fellow, coolly.

"Just my luck to run into a mess like that. Believe me, any other time, I'd of made that girlie. I got her spotted all right."

The Young Fellow looked at him with unfeigned disgust.

"You may have her spotted. But you'd never make her in a thousand years. You're not the type."

"Is that so? Maybe you think you could make her."

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"What if her so-called hubby should blow in on you?"

"There are no more trains to-night."

"Hmm! How would you like to win another hundred? I'll bet you won't have any more luck than I did."

"I'll take that bet. We'll go down now, get the other money, and put up for the new bet."

The Fat Man coughed apologetically.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I haven't got that much with me. Don't want to bother going up to my room just now. Let's make it a gentleman's agreement."

A keen look from the Young Fellow.
"Very well."

He carefully folded the two hundred dollars he had received from the hotel clerk; put it in his wallet.

"We'll go up to the floor her room's on. You show me where it is, then you slip into that linen closet. I'll knock at her door. If I get in and am not thrown out in twenty minutes, I win."

"All right."

The two men walked to the elevator.

The Fat Man slipped into the linen closet; watched the Young Fellow before the Woman's door.

The Young Fellow knocked. The door opened.

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The Fat Man gasped.

He was going in!

Beads of perspiration appeared on the Fat Man's forehead. He pulled out his watch; began to count the seconds.

Twenty-five minutes later, he slunk down the corridor to the elevator—alone.

The Fat Man was packing.

It was early—just a few minutes before seven.

Why not skip, he thought. Better beat it, than pay another hundred to that lucky stiff. He closed his bag, reached for his hat.

Knock, knock.

Somebody at the door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

No answer.

He went to the door, opened it cautiously. He was brushed aside as the Young Fellow shoved the door back and entered the room.

"Morning," he said briefly. "Got my hundred?"

The Fat Man blustered.

"You got your hundred already."

"You dirty welcher, if you don't pay up, I'll take it out of your hide."

The Fat Man moved nervously toward the telephone.

"Get out of here or I'll call the manager."

The Young Fellow smiled grimly.

"If you touch that phone," he said, "I'll have you arrested for insulting my wife last night."

"Your wife!"

The Fat Man turned green, started to shake and tremble and stammer.

"Why—why—I didn't—heh, heh, heh." (trying to laugh it off). "You put a good one over on me there. Of course, I'll pay up—was just joking."

He reached for his pocketbook; drew out ten crisp ten-dollar bills and handed them over.

"Thanks," said the Young Fellow curtly, as he left the room.

Several hours later, the Fat Man was

standing by the desk in the lobby. Suddenly his eyes widened.

The Woman was walking out of the dining room, accompanied by a Flashily Dressed Individual, a person the Fat Man had never seen before.

"Who is the man with that woman?" he asked the clerk.

"Her husband."

"What? Her husband? But it can't be. Why——"

"Sure it is," responded the clerk. "He just got in this morning."

"But I thought—I—oh!"

The Fat Man's eyes opened wide.

"Oh!" he repeated. "Oh!"



THE ROUNDER'S PLAINT

By L. B. Birdsall

This petting party stuff gets on my nerves;
 I'm tired of circling dangerous female curves.
 I thought that I would never, never tire
 Of naughty little flappers, but the fire
 That burned within my manly breast is dead.
 I'd rather take a book and go to bed
 And read a harmless, mid-Victorian tale
 Than follow some elusive damsel's trail
 And drink synthetic liquor from a flask.
 No longer does it give me thrills to bask
 Beneath the glow of shaded boudoir lamps
 And cuddle tantalizing baby vamps
 In *négligé*. Kissing, I find, is tame—
 It seems to me all kisses taste the same.
 Jazz orchestras are now an awful bore;
 I do not care for toddling any more.
 Joy-riding, too, and poker *à la* strip,
 Beach-spooning—all have lost their grip.
 I long for tranquil fireside scenes
 Where I can close my eyes and dream sweet dreams
 Of peace, all undisturbed by girls
 In diaphanous gowns and patent curls,
 Who tire me. Their hot lips leave mine cold;
 Their— Such talk! I must be getting old!



THE INNOCENT LITTLE THING

By John H. McNeely

HILDA LODGE was different from a lot of the other girls who had left their old parents back on the farm and had come to Broadway to make their success on the stage.

Hilda was an innocent little thing.

The glare of the footlights, the clamor of popular acclaim, the lure of finery and easy money did not affect her. She was a dainty, unplucked rose in a thistle patch.

If you don't believe it, ask Hilda's mother.

For didn't Mrs. Lodge make the long journey all the way from the farm up in New Hampshire to New York to find out the truth for herself?

"Spect you'd better take a trip down to New York, Mazie, and see how Hilda's getting along," said Calvin Lodge one evening, just after he had come in from his spring plowing.

"There you go, Calvin, worrying about Hilda again," replied Mrs. Lodge, as she lifted a pot of boiling potatoes from the stove and drained the water off them.

"I ain't worrying, but you've heard about what happens to young girls from the country that go on the stage."

"Yes, Calvin, but Hilda's different. She's had the raising. She's been brought up 'cording to strict New England ideas. She's as innocent now as the day she left here two years ago."

"Spect it won't do no harm, though, for you to take a run down to New York and see how she's getting along."

Mrs. Lodge didn't even let Hilda know she was coming. She wanted to surprise the innocent little thing. And besides, it costs money to send telegrams, and

thrifty New England farming people don't believe in such extravagances.

It was almost eleven o'clock at night when Mrs. Lodge knocked on the stage door of the Palais Royal Theatre. For an hour she had been wandering about the intricate streets of New York after leaving the depot, trying to find the alleyway that would bring her to the stage entrance.

The rain was pouring in torrents. This was fortunate for Mrs. Lodge. Otherwise the hard-hearted man who stood guard over the stage door would have refused her admittance. But when he saw her frail little figure, with water dripping from her worn straw bonnet, standing there, he did not have the crust to handle her in the gruff manner he treated the stage Johnnies that appeared there every night.

"You can step in out of the rain, madame, but we don't allow no one on the stage unless they've got a permit," he told her.

"A permit?" asked Mrs. Lodge timidly.

"Yes, madame, you've got to have a permit from the manager around at the front office before you can get in here."

"But," protested Mrs. Lodge, "I guess it's different with me. I'm Hilda Lodge's mother."

The mention of the name of a chorus girl in the Palais Royal Theatre changed the situation. The guard of the stage door smiled and almost smirked.

"Course, madame, if you're Miss Lodge's mother, that puts an entirely new phase on the matter. The rule is against letting anybody on the stage without a permit, but I guess that don't apply to a mother of a girl in the chorus."

A stage hand was summoned. He asked Mrs. Lodge to follow him, and he led her behind the drop curtains to a long flight of wooden stairs leading so high up into the wings that she couldn't see the end of it.

"You don't mind climbing?" he muttered, as he started upward.

"No, I don't mind," she answered as she followed him, laboring slowly up the steps.

As she struggled upward she heard the syncopating music of the orchestra and the shrill singing of the chorus, its volume swelling upward from the stage below.

When the stage hand had reached the first landing he stopped to allow her to rest.

"Just another flight and we'll be there," he volunteered.

Mrs. Lodge breathed heavily as she leaned against the rail. Poor little Hilda, she thought, poor little innocent thing! She had to climb these stairs four or five times every performance. How foolish of Calvin to think that anything could have gone wrong with her! Why, after climbing these steps so many times a day she'd be too tired out to go to any of those gay midnight parties, even if she wanted to.

They reached the dressing room at the end of the second flight. The stage hand flung open the door.

"Just go in and sit down. They're just singing the grand finale now, so your daughter'll be up in no time."

Mrs. Lodge was amazed at what she saw when she stepped inside. She could hardly believe her eyes. The dressing room was a sight. There were pink stockings and blue stockings and yellow stockings, all of sheer silk, scattered haphazardly on the floor. And there was lingerie and fluffy ballet skirts of bright colors thrown about in the greatest disorder. The crude wooden dressing table, with its brilliant electric lights shining full into the mirrors upon

the wall, was in confusion with jars of cold cream, cups of rouge and tubes of theatrical paint lying about in complete disarrangement.

For a moment a shadow of doubt came into Mrs. Lodge's mind. Hilda had always been taught to be so neat and orderly at home. That was part of her early New England raising. Tidiness and cleanliness. How many hours she had spent preaching to Hilda when she was a child the importance of being neat and tidy. If Hilda had forgotten this part of her training, maybe she had also forgotten the other—but Mrs. Lodge would not allow her thoughts to go further. Hilda was still the sweet little innocent thing that she was when she had left the farm up in New Hampshire two years ago.

Just then she heard footsteps on the stairs outside and before she could hardly turn around she was in Hilda's arms, kissing her eagerly.

"You dear, sweet, innocent thing!" crooned Mrs. Lodge. "You dear, sweet, innocent thing!"

"If it isn't mother!" cried Hilda. "I was never so startled in my life. Why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"I wanted to surprise you, Hilda."

Hilda led her mother over to a chair, and, pushing aside one of her stage costumes, sat her down upon it.

"Now you just sit there until I wash up and get into my street clothes, Mama. It won't take me long."

"Oh, Hilda, how beautiful you look!" exclaimed Mrs. Lodge, gazing at her daughter, her face aglow with admiration.

Hilda did look wonderful. In the finale of the last act she changed to a lovely black evening gown with dazzling jet beads that sparkled effulgently in the rays of light that shone upon them. She wore a large diamond comb in her hair and imitation diamond buckles on her slippers.

But Hilda did not want to discuss her stage wardrobe with her mother. Instead, she was congratulating herself that Mrs. Lodge had not arrived an hour earlier. If she had, she would have seen her daughter in that ethereal creation of nature she wore when she appeared in the Dance of the Seven Veils during the second act. So Hilda changed the subject of conversation.

"How's dear old Dad?" she asked, as she began undressing hurriedly.

"He's just the same as ever," answered Mrs. Lodge. "Never saw him look better in my life. But he's still getting up things just like he used to when you were a little girl. Do you remember, Hilda, how he was always afraid that something was going to happen to you. Well, he's still that way. I wouldn't be here right now, if it wasn't for him. As soon as he heard you'd gone on the stage, he began to worry. He said that there were so many temptations in a big city and——"

"How silly of old Dad!" interrupted Hilda.

"That's exactly what I said to him, Hilda. I told him that you were as sweet and innocent now as when you left us and came down here two years ago."

"Yes," repeated Hilda after her mother, but with a catch in her voice that went unnoticed. "just as sweet and innocent now as when I left you and Dad two years ago."

Hilda was now getting into her street clothes. Her mother had commenced picking up the costumes scattered about the room and arranging them in a trunk standing in the corner. Hilda apologized for the way the room looked.

"You see, Mama," she explained. "I have to change seven times during every performance. I just rush in here and throw off one costume and jump into another and run down to the stage. Then I'm back again, making another change."

Mrs. Lodge crossed over to her daughter and put her arms around her affectionately.

"You poor innocent little thing! And I thought all the time that you had forgotten the way I used to preach to you about being neat and tidy."

"Why, Mama!" replied Hilda. "Do you think I'd ever be able to forget that?"

By this time Hilda was completely dressed in a handsome and expensive tailor-made suit that fitted her figure perfectly. Her mother could not take her eyes from her.

They went out the door and started the tortuous and dizzy descent down the flight of wooden steps to the stage below. Hilda showed signs of nervousness as they approached the stage door through which Mrs. Lodge had entered not an hour before. The man opened it for them. It was still raining in torrents.

As they stepped out, a uniformed chauffeur touched the vizer of his cap politely to Hilda and extended an up-raised umbrella.

"Your limousine's waiting for you, Miss Lodge. It's right around the corner," he said.

Hilda's face flushed a deep crimson, but Mrs. Lodge didn't notice it. She turned quickly and seizing her mother's arm started with her down the alleyway.

"You're going the wrong way, Miss Lodge," the chauffeur called loudly after her. "The limousine's over on Forty-second Street."

Increasing her pace, Hilda fairly dragged her mother along with her as if in a panic. Mrs. Lodge was breathless when they reached the corner of the alley and turned into the street.

"There'll be a street car here in a moment," said Hilda, trying to control herself.

"Who was that man who spoke to you as we were coming out of the stage door, Hilda?" asked Mrs. Lodge, still panting for breath.

BLACK BABY

By Belle Beatty

ALL the way home from Buffalo in the train, Gregory had been cudgeling his brains, trying to think out the best way of breaking it to Joyce that their life together would have to come to an end.

You couldn't just walk in and tell her so—like that! You couldn't just walk up and say to the girl that you had decided to get married, and had as yet no idea of to whom! No! Most decidedly, you couldn't do that.

Joyce would look at him with those big blue eyes of hers, and her rosy young mouth would quirk up at the corners, and she would put her head on one side and she would laugh that gurgling child-like laugh of hers.

"Oh, you go *on*!" she would say, and she would come nuzzling up against his arm, like a soft, warm, lovable little puppy. "Oh, you go *on*!"

She wouldn't believe him—that was all there was to it. She wouldn't believe him, if he told her.

Sitting there in his chair in the Pullman, Gregory drew his brows together, and puzzled over how best to get the idea through to her that it would have to end—their life together.

Of course, he would make satisfactory arrangements with her about money. That was the easiest part of it.

He twisted his chair around and stared out at the fields that seemed to be flying by, as the train tore along over the tracks.

In a way, he felt responsible for Joyce, for if it had not been for him, she would not now be alive.

Not quite two years ago, it was now, since that bitter cold January night when

he had found Joyce lying cold and nearly dead, before his door.

He had been to a party at the Harri-mans' and coming home long after midnight in a taxi, had paid the driver hurriedly and had gone on up the high, old-fashioned stoop of the old Gregory house, where he lived all alone, with only Moto, his Jap, to take care of him.

Bitter cold, it was that night. Even now, he could remember the stinging cold of the icy air that struck across his face like a lash as he stepped out of the taxi.

His foot had struck something soft, huddled up on the floor in the tiny vestibule between the inner and the outer doors, and with a startled exclamation, he had stooped down and peered at what lay there. It was a woman—limp, inert, hardly breathing. . . . Impatiently, he shook her shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he said sharply. "Get up! Get up, now! You can't stay here, you know. You'll have to get up!"

He tugged her to her feet, but she sagged limply against him, and holding her across his arm, he fitted his key into the lock, opened the door, and carried her into the hall.

"Well, this is *nice*, I must say!" he muttered, fuming with exasperation. "This is nice, I *must* say!"

Down the hall he carried the unconscious girl into the library, and laid her upon the couch there. He threw off his hat and coat, and turned on the lights. The fire had died down to glowing embers, but the room was warm and comfortable, and there on the table was the silver tray with sandwiches, and the

bottle of Scotch and the siphon that Moto always left for him at night.

Scowling, Gregory bent over the girl and examined her closely. There wasn't the slightest odor of drink about her. Drugs, perhaps, he thought, and then, as he noticed the fragile wrists and ankles, thin almost to emaciation, he thought: "Starvation, maybe."

The girl was young—not more than seventeen or eighteen, he thought, looking at the little immature breasts, and the small childlike face that had something infinitely appealing about it.

She felt cold—cold as death, he said to himself with a shudder, as he lifted the little hand and then let it fall again. How long had she been lying out there in the winter night? Had she rung the bell, he wondered, and no one heard her? Why had she come to that house of all others? Why. . . .

He rumbled up his hair distractedly.

"By George! The first thing to do is to get her warm!" he said, speaking out loud, as if there was someone to hear him.

"See here!" he said to her, shaking her gently by her shoulder, "See here! You'll have to wake up! You must wake up!"

He shook her again, but the long thick eyelashes lay motionless upon her cheek, and she made no response whatever.

"By George!" he said again, worriedly. "By George, if I don't get her warm, she may die! Nice thing—that'd be! A strange woman dying on me—here!"

"If I only had old Sarah here!" he thought. "If only I had anybody! Moto—I can't call on him. He'd be worse than useless!"

As he bent anxiously over the girl, it seemed to him that a change came over her face. A blue look—a shadow spread itself across her face—dark—purplish—ominous. . . .

"By God!" he said frantically. "By

God, I believe she's dying now! I've got to do something! I can't wait for anybody!"

He picked her up—she was so slight and so little that it was like lifting up a child,—and hurried through the hall and up the stairs.

In his bedroom there was a dim light burning, and on the hearth a little fire gleamed. The bed was turned down, ready for him, and he pulled back the sheets and laid the girl in the bed.

And all this time, she never opened her eyes, never murmured. If it had not been for the little wraithlike breaths that came unevenly from between her blue lips, he would have thought her already dead.

"By George! By George!" he kept saying frantically. "By George! This is a little too much, this is! A strange woman—dying—here in the house—like this! This is a little too much! By George, she *won't* die—not if I know it!"

He pulled off her shoes and stockings. Her feet were blue with cold; like ice they felt to his warm hands. There on a chair by the bed was his warm wadded dressing gown, and his slippers, just as Moto had laid them out, ready for him. He lifted the girl up and holding her in his lap like a baby, he pulled off her dress and wrapped her up in the dressing gown, and then laid her back in the bed again.

He brought the electric heating pad, connected it with the light socket, turned it on, and put it in the bed, against her poor, blue little feet.

"By George!" he said stubbornly. "By George! She *won't* die on me—not if I know it!"

He rushed about frantically. Brought out from the closet another warm fleecy blanket, and wrapped it around her. He rubbed her cold feet and hands between his warm hands. He found a hot water bottle, unused for years, filled it in the bathroom, and tucked it into bed with her.

"Warm milk!" he said to himself. "That's the stuff! Warm milk!"

He rushed down the stairs, all the way down to the basement, poured out some milk into a saucepan, warmed it on the gas stove, and carried it upstairs.

"Now! Here!" he said to the unconscious girl in the bed. "You take this! You take it, I say! You're not going to die on me—not if I know it!"

He slipped his arm under her shoulders and lifted her up, and held the warm milk to her lips.

"Take it! Take it!" he said to her. He tipped the glass so that the milk, warm and comforting, lapped against her lips. Like a baby, without opening her eyes, she swallowed some of it. She sighed. It seemed to him that the horrible blue shadow that lay across her face was growing a little less blue, a little less horrible and ominous to see.

"More! More!" he said to her insistently, and he tipped the milk against her lips once more. She swallowed again. She drank it all, and he poured out more and gave it to her. When she had succeeded in swallowing two glasses of the comforting life-giving milk, he laid her down again, tucked the blankets in around her, and stood up.

All this time, she had not once opened her eyes. He wasn't sure that she was conscious. He leaned over and spoke to her.

"You know you ought to tell me who you are," he said. "You ought to tell me your name and where you came from."

She made no answer and the eyelashes that lay on her cheeks did not waver. She sighed. Contentedly, as a baby sighs, she sighed. Then she turned herself a little, and settled down into a more comfortable position. She sighed again. The blue look had all but disappeared now.

"Well!" said Gregory, with a satisfied expression on his face. "Well!" She

won't die on me after all! Time enough in the morning to find out who she is!"

That night he slept on the couch in his dressing room. He woke twice and tiptoed in to look at the girl. She lay there in his bed, sleeping like a baby. She was warm and rosy now, he saw with satisfaction. Her hands and feet felt warm, and she breathed easily, her breath coming softly and evenly from between lips that had taken on a faintly rosy look.

Gregory rubbed his hands together, satisfied.

"Well, sir!" he said to himself. "Well, sir! She didn't die on me, after all!"

The bright winter sun was pouring into his room the next morning when he woke. Moto stood beside him grinning, his little slit-like eyes all but invisible in his brown face.

"Little lady awake!" the Jap said, giggling. "I go in to fix your bath, same like usual, and she sit up in bed, and say where are she, and who are I?"

He giggled again.

Gregory sat up and rumbled up his hair. What was he to do with her—now? He scowled thoughtfully.

"That'll do, Moto. You can go now," he said shortly.

He slipped his arms into a dressing-gown, tied the cord around his waist, and put his feet into slippers and went through the passage to the bedroom door. He tapped on the door.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Ye-yes!" said a soft, frightened voice, and he pushed open the door and went in.

There in the middle of the old four-poster, she sat, wide-eyed, frightened-looking, her lips parted and her hand at her throat. A little girl, she looked—a blue-eyed, frightened little girl. She stared at him as he came into the room.

"Wh-where am I?" she said, breathlessly. "Wh—what happened? Where am I?"

Gregory went slowly up to the bed

and looked at her. How young she looked there in the morning sunlight! Her eyes were blue—the deep, dark purple-blue that Scottish people often have—eyes like pansies. And her hair was gold—not the flaxen gold, like a doll's—but a darker, deeper kind of reddish gold.

"There's no need to be frightened," he said to her kindly. "You're in my house. I found you lying there on the steps, just inside the outer door, when I came home late last night."

Her face twisted painfully, her eyes closed a moment and then opened wide again.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I went up the steps, and crawled in there. The house looked dark—and I thought I could go in there—and no one would find me till it was over and done with."

"No one find you!" he repeated. "Didn't you know that if you stayed out there on a night like last night, it wouldn't make any difference whether anyone found you or not? Didn't you know that if you stayed out there, you'd freeze to death?"

"Not freeze—to death," she said in a whisper. "Not freeze. I went in there to die! I took some sleeping stuff. I wanted to die—but I had no place to do it in!" Gregory scowled.

"You wanted to die?" he said. "Why did you want to die? What have you done that you should want to die?"

She let her long feathery eyelashes fall upon her cheeks. Then she looked up at him, and tears gathered in her blue eyes and brimmed over and rolled, one by one, down her cheeks.

"There was nothing else for me," she said, twisting her fingers together. "I had no place to go—no place to sleep even. I saw that this house was all dark, and I crept into the little place there between the doors. . . ."

"But why—why—why—?" he asked impatiently. "Why did you want to die?"

She sighed, shook her head sadly, and clasped her hands together.

"My money was all gone," she said in a low voice. "The woman put me out of the house where I had been boarding because I could not pay. She kept all my clothes. They won't take you in a new place if you have nothing—nothing at all. I was so tired—and so hungry too. I walked and walked and walked, all day yesterday, but everywhere I went, they would not have me. I had the sleeping tablets in my purse. It was all I did have in my purse. I had been saving them. I knew the time would come when I'd want to die.

"I went into a drug store and asked for a drink of water, and I swallowed them, five of them, and then I went out and walked along the street. I grew so sleepy—so sleepy—and I thought if only I could creep in somewhere—where no one would find me—that I could stay there till it was over. I crept up the steps here, and that's all I remember."

Gregory nodded his head. He turned and walked across the room, came back and stood staring down at her, there in his bed.

"Well, what now?" he asked. "What now?"

She shook her head hopelessly. "I don't know," she said. "I thought it would be all over—and now I'm still here—and I've got it all to do over again."

She began to cry, sobbing and sniffing like a little child. She fell back on the pillows, and hid her face in the crook of one thin, child-like arm.

"Don't cry," he said awkwardly. "Don't cry. You won't have to do it all over again. We'll take care of you somehow."

It was three weeks before Joyce was well again. Three weeks, which she spent lying listlessly there in Gregory's bed, cared for by the trained nurse whom he got in—a pert, red-haired

young Irish woman named Grogan, who peered at Gregory and at her patient with sharp, gray-green eyes that reminded him of gimlets.

At the end of the third week, Miss Grogan discharged herself.

"You're well now," she said to Joyce. "You know as well as I do that you're perfectly well. You could get up this minute if you wanted to. Not that I ever thought there was anything very much the matter with you," she added in a mutter, as she turned away.

Miss Grogan and Joyce had conceived a violent dislike for each other, and made no bones about showing it openly.

"All right," Joyce said carelessly. "I'm well enough to do without you, anyway. Not that I ever did think you were much good to me!" she added, in a mutter that mimicked Miss Grogan's.

Miss Grogan doffed her white uniform, arrayed herself in a suit that she would have described as "snappy," put on a *cloche* that covered her face down to the top of her nose and enclosed it on each side, and minced away.

Rather shakily, Joyce got up and put on her shabby little blue jersey dress, and holding fast to the banister, she went down to the library where Gregory sat reading the paper.

He stood up as she appeared in the doorway and came forward to take both her hands in his.

"Well, little lady!" he said kindly. "This is the first time you've been downstairs, isn't it?"

"The first time—and the last," she said, in a low voice.

"How do you mean—the last?" he asked.

"Miss Grogan's gone," she said. "She says that I'm well again, and I am. So I'll go now."

"So you're well again, are you?" Gregory asked.

"Yes."

"And what do you mean to do?" he inquired.

She shook her head. Her nostrils (delicate, sensitive nostrils, the sign of a high-spirited and emotional temperament) quivered.

"Oh, I'll get along," she said, and she threw up her head with a little gesture of pride. "I'll get along—somehow."

"Mr. Gregory," she said, her blue eyes raised to his. "Mr. Gregory, I can't thank you. I can't thank you—for what you did! I can't say—I can't say anything——"

"Don't try," he said kindly. "Why try to say anything?"

She swallowed an aching lump in her throat. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

"What you've done for me," she said, with a voice that wavered a little, "for what you've done for me—I could never thank you! Never! Now, I'll go. Good-by! Good-by!"

She turned away and started towards the door, and Gregory stood looking after her. This little shabby figure, in the worn, dark blue jersey dress—this little girl with the red-gold hair that lighted the room like a flame that dark February afternoon—had somehow in the last three weeks come to be the dearest thing in the world to him!

He realized that he had fallen in love with this little waif that he had picked up off the streets and brought in out of the winter night.

Knowing almost nothing of her, he had fallen in love with her, as he had never fallen in love in all his life before.

He wanted her. He yearned for her. He literally ached for her. Day after day, he had sat there in the room where she lay white and listless in his bed, and had gazed at her, so thin and fragile that she seemed almost to be transparent, her long eyelashes lying on her soft babyish cheeks, her red mouth drawn down at the corners, like a wistful baby's mouth.

Day after day, he had knocked at the

door, been admitted, and had sat there by the bed, gazing at her.

Sometimes, the blue eyes had opened and she had smiled at him. Sometimes, they had talked a little, and she had told him of the loneliness and terror that had been her portion during the year that had passed since she came to New York to try to gain a foothold and earn her living there.

She was so little—so soft and sweet and gentle. He stood there looking at her as she turned away from him and went towards the door, and he felt an ache in his heart, and his eyes smarted with tears.

"Joyce!" he said. "Joyce!"

At the sound of her name—his voice—she stopped and stood motionless, her back towards him, her breath catching in her throat.

"Joyce!" he said again, and slowly, she turned around and lifted her eyes to his.

He went to her, standing motionless there, gazing at him, and took both her hands in his, and leaned down close to her.

"Joyce—do you want to go?" he asked, in a low voice. "Do you want to go away from me?"

She caught her underlip between her teeth, and looked at him wistfully, as she shook her head. "No," she said, in a voice that was almost inaudible.

"Then stay!" he said to her. "Stay! Stay! Stay!" He caught her up in his arms, and carried her over to the big chair before the fireplace and sat down with her in his arms.

"Stay then," he whispered to her. "I want you! I want you more than I ever wanted anything in my life! Let me love you! Let me take care of you! I want to take care of you, and keep you safe. I love you—and I want you with me always!"

He put his hand under her chin, tipped up her head and turned her face to his.

"You must have seen what was hap-

pening to me these last few weeks together," he said. "I love you. Joyce—Joyce—don't you love me—just a little bit?"

She put her hands on each side of his face, and looked long and tenderly into his eyes.

"I think I've loved you from the very first minute I opened my eyes and saw you upstairs there," she said slowly. "I owe you everything. Everything. My life. Everything in the world. If you want me—take me—take me——"

It was then that Gregory kissed her for the first time—a tender, loving kiss, and she kissed him back again, as a little child kisses.

"Joyce, darling child!" he said. "You're like a little girl! You're like a little, hard, firm, unopened pink rosebud! I love you! Do you hear me? I love you! I love you!"

And he kissed her again and again and again, not so tenderly, until her face was all flushed and glowing, and her blue eyes were no longer wistful, but happy and shining with the wonder of it all.

Then after that, they had taken up their life together.

"You know I'm not the marrying sort," he said to her. "No domestic life for me! No squalling kids, with their adenoids and tonsils and measles and mumps and chicken-pox! I'll take a little apartment for you—for, of course, I can't do that sort of thing here in this house—and we'll be happy together——"

"Whatever you like," she said. "Whatever you like, as long as we're together. Do what you like with me."

How she had bloomed! The little, tight, hard, pink rosebud had blossomed out into a beautiful glowing rose. She was always aglow with happiness after that—gay, vivacious, happy.

"Let's go somewhere," she was always saying. "Oh—let's go somewhere

—where there's music—and lights—and dancing."

No, a home life would never suit Joyce. She could dance till three o'clock, and then look as fresh as a rose. No, Joyce simply didn't fit in with any home-life scheme. He simply could not imagine her like that.

For some time, Gregory had been conscious of the fact that he was becoming more and more bored by the laborious gaiety of the night life of New York, and now, since this visit to Buffalo, he knew that he was through with it.

He wanted a home of his own—a home where there was someone of his own—a little someone in a sailor suit, with sturdy bare knees above his socks.

And he certainly couldn't walk in and tell Joyce any such thing as that! She would look at him and crow with laughter.

"She'd think I was cuckoo!" he said to himself, with a twisted grin.

But all the same, his mind was definitely made up, and he was determined to go through with it. He was thirty-four. He was ready now to marry and settle down. He felt as if he never wanted to see another flask; never wanted to look at another orchestra of sweating, grinning negroes, banging out their jungle music; never wanted to twist and wriggle and writhe through another dance, with a half-naked girl in his arms.

He had never thought he liked children until he made this last trip to Buffalo, and took to going up to the nursery late every afternoon to see Kit, his brother's wife, "bath" the little baby and give it its bottle of milk, before laying it in the crib for the night.

Kit was a jolly, happy, young woman, and she would sit there before the nursery fire in a little rocking chair, holding the baby as it pulled away on its bottle, and young Bill played with his blocks or his trains or his circus wagons on the floor near her.

"Why—you like children, don't you, Jim?" Kit said to him. "You ought to get married yourself."

"Oh, time enough," he answered. "Time enough."

"Well," Kit said, "I don't know about that. Billy's six, you know. If you're going to have a little Billy of your own, you want to be young enough so you'll have some fun with him. You're thirty-four now, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"Uncle Jim," said Billy looking up from his blocks.

"Yes, old son," he answered.

"Well, now, Uncle Jim, do you think that God made everything in the world like Mother says he did?"

"Of course."

"Well—uh—now—did He make Himself?"

Gregory drew his eyebrows together and stared at the little boy on the floor. Then he looked up at Kit and she looked soberly back at him. It was one of her inviolable rules that Billy must never be laughed at. His questions must be answered—if possible—and he must never be laughed at. She folded her red lips in a firm line, to keep back a smile, and nodded her head.

"Ye—yes. He did," said Gregory.

Billy put a block on the very tiptop of the castle he was building.

"I s'pose He sat down while He made His feet," he said thoughtfully. "Well—now, lookit here, Uncle Jim—how did he make His hands?"

Gregory jumped up suddenly and made a rush for the door.

"By George!" he stuttered, "I've just this minute thought of something I've got to tend to right off!"

He bolted out of the door, and in the hall his mouth stretched out into a wide smile.

"That's a great kid!" he said to himself. "Great kid!"

Billy had a habit of watching at the nursery window for Uncle Jim, and

when he appeared, he would rush pell-mell down the stairs, and as Gregory came in the door, Billy would rush at him ecstatically, hugging his knees and gamboling around him like a little puppy. Great little kid—Billy!

It was really Billy who had caused Gregory to make up his mind. A normal life—a home and family—there in the old Gregory house where his family had lived for so many years; someone there when you went home; a place to spend the evenings, and not so much drinking and dancing and jazz.

But the trouble was to know how best to break it to Joyce. He hated the thought of telling her. Those blue eyes! He hated, too, to think of the time when there'd be no Joyce to see.

The train rolled slowly into the trainshed, and he stood up, put on his coat, hooked his stick over his arm, and followed his fellow travelers down the aisle.

"I'll go right up there now," he said to himself. "Now. While I feel like it—and get it over with."

The taxi jolted and jounced along over the streets, and he sat scowling, planning what he would say to her. About the money part of it—what arrangements he would make about that. . . .

He went up in the elevator, walked slowly along the hall, and fitted his key into the lock. The doorchain was on, and the door slid back a few inches and no more. He pressed his finger upon the bell button at the side of the door and rang it long and loudly.

"Who is it?" called Joyce, from the bedroom down the narrow inner hall.

Fuming with impatience, he made no answer. Like a sulky boy, he pressed his finger upon the bell again. Where the devil was that Rosette that she didn't come and let him in?

"I can't come just now," called out Joyce. "No use ringing the bell any more, for my maid's gone to the store. I don't want any soap—or anything—

this morning. Shut the door, please, and go away."

"It's me—it's Jim!" he said furiously, through the crack of the door. "What a way to be treated!" he said to himself angrily. Here he returned from a trip, and this was the way he was met!

"It's me!" he called out angrily. "Why the devil don't you come and let me in?"

There was a moment of utter silence after he spoke.

"Joyce!" he called out. "Joyce, what the devil's the meaning of this! Come and let me in!"

Then, suddenly, with a little rush, Joyce was there before him, stammering, blushing, smiling up at him, fumbling with the door chain.

"Jimmie!" she said, "I didn't expect you! You never let me know you were coming!"

She slipped off the chain, and Gregory stepped in and shut the door. Joyce threw her arms around him and snuggled her head against his arm.

"Oh, Jimmie!" she said. "I *am* glad to have you back!"

Gregory looked down at her gloomily. She was prettier than ever, it seemed to him. She was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen! How on earth was he ever going to tell her. . . .

Suddenly he became aware that the cinder that had got into his eye on the train was still there under the eyelid. He fumbled in his pocket, and blinked his eyes.

"Cinder in my eye," he said. "Lost my handkerchief. I'll just go get another one." He started down the hall towards the bedroom.

"Jimmie!" cried Joyce, as she flew along the hall ahead of him, "Jimmie—let me get it for you."

She clasped the fingers of both hands around his arm. She was trying to hold him back. . . .

He stopped short and scowled down at her.

"Why—I'll get it myself!" he said, and threw off her hands and went on down the hall.

"Jimmie!" Joyce gasped out, as she sped past him and barred his way into the bedroom, "Jimmie—you mustn't—you mustn't go in there! Jimmie! I ask you not to!"

Gregory's lips drew back from his teeth in an angry, soundless snarl. So—this was it! This was what he'd come back to! He glared down at her, standing there before him, barring his way. . . .

"Stand aside!" he said coldly.

"Jimmie! No! No!"

"Joyce!" he thundered, "*Stand aside!*"

"No! Oh, no—no! Jimmie!"

She wrung her hands together, her blue eyes were full of terror. Gregory seized her by the shoulder, set her aside, and opened the door.

"Oh!" she groaned, "Oh, Jimmie! Jimmie!"

Inside the bedroom, Gregory stood staring. He lowered his head, shut his eyes tight, and then opened them wide and looked again.

"Good God!" he said in a whisper. "Good God!"

There in the middle of the bed sat a fat, jolly, little black baby, stark naked, a cake of soap in his little black hands. On a chair by the bed stood all the paraphernalia for a baby's bath—a little tin bathtub, towels, washcloths, talcum powder, safety pins.

Dazed, Gregory turned and looked at Joyce. He saw then that she was wearing a little blue cotton dress, just such a dress as Kit wore in the mornings, and around her waist she had an apron that was made out of a big soft Turkish towel.

"My good God!" Gregory said. He drew one hand dazedly across his forehead.

"Oh, Jimmie!" wailed Joyce—and then from behind her there came the sound of rushing feet—the sound of

someone who came snorting and panting into the room and snatched up the fat, jolly, little black baby.

"Mum! Mum! Mum!" he gurgled, and wound his arms and legs around her as she picked him up.

"'Tain't my fault! 'Tain't my fault, Mr. Gregory, sir!" Rosette mumbled. "Miss Joyce—she would do it! I tells her all along this would happen some day! 'Tain't my fault——" She disappeared with the fat, black baby in her arms.

Jim Gregory felt his knees give way under him, and he let himself sink down into a chair. Oh! It was *Rosette's* baby! And he had thought—— What *had* he thought, anyway?

"Rosette's baby," he said feebly.

"I don't *care!*" wailed Joyce childishly. "I don't care if it is Rosette's! He's a baby, isn't he. He's little and soft and fat and jolly, isn't he? I never let you know about him because you said how you hate babies, and domestic life, and everything. I don't *care!* I don't *care!*"

She threw herself down crosswise on the bed and kicked her feet like a little girl in a tantrum.

"Do you mean—do you mean—you *like* babies?" Gregory asked.

"*Of course* I like babies!" she snapped, as if never in her life had she ever heard such a foolish question. "I only pretended not to because you said how you hated them. *Of course* I like babies! And I don't care now if you *do* know it! So there!"

"Joyce," he said soberly, "do you mean that you've been pretending just to please me?"

"Yes," she said.

"But do you actually like babies so much that you like that little black one?"

"Yes!" she said, with a little shame-faced giggle, "He's awfully cute and funny. *Loads* of fun! I give him his bath every morning."

"How—how old is he?"

THE TRIANGLE PLUS

By Edward Ettinger

CHARACTERS

ARTHUR FORREST
JANET FORREST
GEORGE BRYCE
FRANK BRYCE
DICK

SCENE: *The living-room in the Park Avenue home of the Forrests.*
TIME: *A summer's afternoon.*

At the curtain's rise, Arthur Forrest, an elderly millionaire, of about sixty, is pacing up and down the room, grunting and grumbling. George Bryce and his brother, Frank Bryce, are watching him amusedly. They are men in the early thirties.

ARTHUR: This is very aggravating, to say the least. Why didn't you have sense enough to stay dead when we thought you dead?

GEORGE: My conscience wouldn't let me after I remembered that I had left poor Janet all alone.

ARTHUR: Well, she managed to get along very nicely without you.

GEORGE: So I notice. She married you, and you're worth a few millions.

ARTHUR: I want you to understand that she married me for love.

GEORGE: Undoubtedly. That was the same reason she married me.

ARTHUR: Yes, and you abused it. You deserted her just six months after you were married. Where have you been for the last four years?

GEORGE: I'll tell you just how it happened. As you have probably heard, I am a writer. I am a bit eccentric and

make my decisions on the spur of the moment. One day I decided to write some South Sea stories and thought it would be a good idea to go down there to get some local color. It slipped my mind entirely that I was married and that I had a wife at home waiting for me.

ARTHUR: You ought to be ashamed to admit it, especially with such a dear little girl as Janet for a wife.

GEORGE: Correct. But let me continue. After I left the South Sea Islands, I toured Europe. It was there, either in London or in Paris, that I suddenly remembered that I was married and that I had entirely forgotten to send a picture post-card to my wife. My conscience bothered me and I came home immediately only to find that she had given me up as dead and married you.

ARTHUR: Well, what do you intend doing now?

GEORGE: There is only one thing for me to do, take my wife home.

ARTHUR: You shan't have her! She is legally married to me.

FRANK: Just one moment, Mr. Forrest. As a member of the legal profession and counsel to my brother, allow me to say a few words. In a case of this kind, the law provides that if the husband returns within five years, he is still the legal husband of the wife.

ARTHUR: Then you mean to tell me that Janet can be held for bigamy?

FRANK: Absolutely! The only thing to do is to have your marriage declared void.

ARTHUR: I can't give her up! Janet loves me too much.

GEORGE: Nonsense. If I said the

word, she would put poison in your coffee. In spite of my being a bit absent-minded, she still worships the ground I tread upon.

FRANK: As a member of the legal profession, allow me to say a few words. Both of you gentlemen are quite positive that you have the love of Janet, the young lady concerned in this controversy. Why not, in all justice, let her decide whom she wishes as her husband?

GEORGE: Good idea! Splendid!

ARTHUR: I haven't the slightest doubt in my mind that she would select me, but still, I think it rather crude to ask her bluntly to make her choice.

FRANK: Well, is there any other way in which you could discover who has the lady's affections?

GEORGE: I've got an idea. I once used a similar situation in one of my yarns. I'll show you how we can discover whom she loves without her suspecting it. She'll have to decide on the spur of the moment, and there will be no possibility of her being influenced by wealth or fame.

FRANK: As a member of the legal profession, I must say that it sounds very fair.

ARTHUR: Speak up. What is your suggestion? I have no fear for the result.

GEORGE: Well, Janet is due here within five minutes, so we must act quickly. This is my plan. You, Mr. Forrest, and I will hide behind the curtains so that when Janet comes in she will see neither one of us. My brother Frank will leave the house and telephone to Janet here that you and I met with an automobile accident and that we are both lying in hospitals. We are dying. She will naturally run to the one she loves most. Am I right?

ARTHUR: Quite right.

GEORGE: And that one will remain her husband. Is that agreeable to you?

ARTHUR: Yes.

GEORGE: All right, Frank. You had

better leave right now. Be sure to tell her that we are in different hospitals.

[Frank leaves the room.]

ARTHUR: I think it is foolish on your part to go to all this trouble. I'm only doing it to satisfy you that Janet has lost whatever love she had for you.

GEORGE: Don't be so sure. Even though I do say it myself, I'm still young and handsome. And first love is always the best love.

ARTHUR: Sh! I think I hear her coming!

GEORGE: Let's hide!

[They get behind the curtains. A few seconds later Janet comes in. She is a very pretty girl and dressed very smartly.]

JANET: It's strange that they are not here. They told me especially to be punctual. Oh, dear, and I had to give up a *matinée* for this.

[The telephone bell rings and Janet goes over to answer it.]

JANET: What's that? Mr. Forrest and Mr. Bryce met with an automobile accident? Were they hurt? What? They are dying? Are you sure? Mr. Forrest is in Bellevue Hospital? Yes, I understand. I heard that name before. And Mr. Bryce is in the Post Graduate Hospital? Yes, I got the names. Tell me, are you sure they are dying? You're positive that they won't live more than five minutes?

[Janet hangs up the telephone receiver and stands there for a moment absorbed in thought. Then she goes over to the house phone, presses a button and picks up the receiver.]

JANET: Dick, bring the car around to the house at once. It is very important.

[Arthur and George are peeping from behind the curtains with their ears sharpened for the name of the hospital to which she is going.]

JANET: It must have been a terrible accident! He was positive that they would not live more than five minutes.

[The sound of footsteps is heard. Arthur and George drew in their heads. Dick, the chauffeur, a very handsome chap, enters.]

JANET: Is the car outside, Dick?

DICK: Yes. Anything happen?

JANET: I just received a telephone message that both my husbands are dying. In fact, they ought to be dead by this time. The man said they wouldn't live more than five minutes.

DICK: Really?

JANET: Absolutely. And now, Dickie, dear, let's hurry. We've got just fifteen minutes to get down to the City Hall and get our marriage license before the license bureau closes.

[The curtain descends as they walk out arm in arm, while Arthur and George, their mouths open and their eyes fairly popping out of their sockets, watch them leave the room.]

PINK SILK LINGERIE

By Walter R. Green

PRETTY young men of the mother's darling species, unsophisticated debutantes and evil-minded old maids are earnestly asked not to read this story. The author is neither desirous of creating cynical ideals in innocent minds nor of having such an accusation thrown at him by the above mentioned old maids. Confidentially, what follows is written strictly for those of us who have lived sufficiently long to have had all our rose-tinted dreams of undying faith shattered by the cold realities of life.

John Morton and his wife, Dorothy, at the time of this story, had existed for seven years of uneventful married life. Neither rolling in riches nor poverty-stricken, they enjoyed that state of mind wherein it is possible for the little luxuries of life to awaken genuine thrills.

They were neither happy nor unhappy. Of course, they loved each other, yet Dorothy's lack of spirit and John's personification of a perfectly domesticated husband withheld from them the divine thrills that come after all lovers' quarrels. John provided for his wife in exactly the manner that he should, and Dorothy gave to him the utmost in undemonstrative love and implicit trust. Their life was entirely surrounded by commonplace events and relations.

Fred Hammond, debonair and unmarried, was junior partner in the Morton-Hammond Realty Company, and always more than willing to enjoy to the fullest extent all that life threw his way. Still young, and quite handsome in a way, Fred was necessarily popular with the "pretty but poor" feminine population of the city.

"I wish Fred would hurry back with my overcoat," thought John Morton. "I'm ready to go home." It was Thursday afternoon of a blizzard day, and Fred, as usual, had forgotten to bring his coat to the office. Thus it was that he had borrowed John's to go to the post office after the late afternoon mail.

Morton had hardly expressed his wish when Hammond appeared in the doorway of the office.

"Decided I wasn't coming back?" he breezily enquired. "I met Jim on the street and he got wound up on golf, and I couldn't get away. You know how he is," he explained. "Thanks for the coat—it's cold as the deuce outside."

Taking the coat, John left the office with a casual good-night to his partner and the stenographer.

The streets seemed especially crowded as John left the building, and he found himself jostled against a tiny French lingerie shop. The unusually dainty display caught his attention, and he paused to regard the window with interest.

"Very pretty," he muttered. "I suppose that pink pair is what Dorothy was wishing for the other night. Wonder how much they are worth?" he asked himself.

Entering the shop, he timidly asked the price of the garment. He felt his face color as he made the enquiry, and vaguely wondered why they employed such pretty young girls in these shops.

"Only five dollars, sir," the clerk was saying. "They are reduced from seven-fifty. I am sure Madame would be pleased with them," she added with a smile, as she placed the dainty creation before him.

"Guess I'll take them," decided John as he dug for the money. Glancing outside, he added hastily, "You needn't wrap them—here comes my car."

Stuffing the *crêpe de chine* garment into the large pocket of his overcoat, John hurried from the shop and boarded the car which had come to a grinding stop at the corner. He never used his and Dorothy's coupe in driving to and from the office, but invariably left it at home for his wife's use.

Finding a seat, John reached for his glasses as he unfolded the evening paper.

"By George," he exclaimed, "I've left my spectacles at the office! Well," he decided rising, "I'll just have to go back for them."

Entering the office, he found Hammond staring inquiringly at a telegram in his hand.

"Hello!" the latter said. "I was just wondering where I could get in touch with you. Here's a telegram that just came for you," he added, as he passed the yellow sheet to Morton. It read:

"Meet me to-night seven-thirty. Arrange conference concerning Berry Hill subdivision."

"GEORGE WINTHROP."

Winthrop was the man that Morton had interested in the tract owned by his company which would, he thought, prove a gold-mine if developed and promoted in the proper way. Winthrop was considering the loan of sufficient money to put through Hammond's plans.

"Read this, Fred. It seems that we will put over the deal, after all. Winthrop is interested." Passing the telegram back to his partner, John reached for the telephone, and explained to Dorothy that he would be detained in the city until late that night, in conference with Mr. Winthrop.

"That's all right, dear," was her reply to John's conversation. "I shall wait up for you, if it isn't too late."

Two hours later, John Morton and George Winthrop were speeding on their way to the Commodore, the leading hotel in the Southern metropolis in which John lived, where Winthrop had made his reservations.

"Morton," said Winthrop, in his jovial manner, "I haven't seen you since you and Dorothy Miller married. Are you two happy, and are you content as a hen-pecked married man?"

"Well—yes," replied John seriously, "I suppose I am. We are as happy as one could wish, and I don't think there are any complaints on either side worth mentioning." As an afterthought he added, "Dorothy and I have never had a misunderstanding since we've been married."

"What?" exclaimed Winthrop, in surprise. "Do you mean to say that you two have lived together for six or seven years without a quarrel?"

"Yes," replied John absently.

"Well, Morton, you've missed half the pleasure of living, if you have never quarreled a little and then smoothed it over. That's the romance of married life."

For a few moments they rode on in silence. Then Winthrop, seemingly in confidential mood, continued the conversation.

"Women are peculiar, John," he said dreamily. "You'll find that no matter how much they tell you they trust you, every one of them likes to believe the man she loves is somewhat of a devil. And a woman invariably loves her husband more if he goes to her and admits that he has been untrue at one time or another. It's human nature that none of them seem to be able to believe that we men can be true, and I suppose it is a direct appeal to their vanity when we own up once in a while."

The taxi drew up at the hotel entrance, and Morton did not have an opportunity to answer his friend. However, the philosophy of life as outlined

by Winthrop had made its impression on his mind, and he began to think.

"Perhaps," he mused, "that's what has been lacking in mine and Dorothy's life. Probably she thinks me too good, and loves me less for my perfect conduct. But I suppose," he added, "that I should be happy to know that my domestic life is as smoothly regulated as it is, and that I have nothing disturbing my peace of mind from that quarter."

It was eleven o'clock before John rose to leave his friend's rooms. They had spent a very busy three hours upon the Berry Hill project, and John had succeeded in securing the unlimited backing of George Winthrop. The evening was well spent.

All along the oak-bordered drive to his modest but up-to-date home in Druid Hills, John's thoughts were of his wife. Would she be waiting up for him? It was rather late, but there had been very few times that she had not waited for him when business had demanded that he remain in the city until a late hour.

"I hope she will be up," thought John, "so I can tell her of the good fortune I have."

Dismissing the taxi, John walked happily into his little home, to find Dorothy waiting with an expectant smile.

"Did you and Mr. Winthrop complete your plans?" she asked in a rather detached manner.

"Yes, everything is shaping up fine," was the businesslike reply, as he removed his overcoat before giving his wife the customary kiss. "Winthrop has promised to back me to the limit, and there is nothing that can hold back my plans now."

Hand in hand, they walked into the living room, to stand before the sparkling open fire.

"Would you mind looking in my overcoat pocket and bringing my cigarettes, dear?" asked John, forgetting entirely the present he had there for his wife.

Suddenly he was aroused from his

thoughts by a startled little cry from Dorothy. Rushing into the vestibule, he saw her tragically holding the silk garment in one hand and a sheet of lavender note paper in the other.

"John! How could you?" she asked in a pained voice, as the tears began to fall from her pretty brown eyes.

"Let me explain, Dorothy——" he began.

"There is nothing to explain," she interrupted, with rising anger. "This is *all* the explanation I want!" holding the letter and pink silk lingerie before his eyes, and stamping her dainty foot upon the polished floor.

"You surely don't think——" he began again.

"No!" she cried. "I don't *think* anything. But I *know* that you are a brute! The idea of telling me that you had a business engagement, and then——" She finished the sentence with an inarticulate cry, as she sank to the floor in tears.

"But, dear——" bravely spoke up John.

"Don't 'dear' me," came from the floor with emphasis.

This was John's first experience, so you can imagine with what agony he gazed upon the crumpled figure of his wife. Of course, he didn't know what he should do, but finally he took the crumpled note from his wife's fingers, and read:

"Dearest:

I shall expect you at my apartment to-night at eight. Be a good boy, and don't disappoint me.

All the arrangements are made, and there is no reason why we shouldn't have a grand and glorious time.

Love and kisses from

"MABEL."

So that was the trouble! That fool Fred had left one of his letters in the overcoat pocket, and it, with the damning

bit of *crêpe de chine*, made fair promise to toll out the funeral march in honor, and at the expense of his happiness.

"Damn Fred and his affairs!" muttered John. "I'm in a pretty fix now."

But Dorothy was talking again, and there was nothing to do but listen.

"John," she said, "I don't know how you ever could be guilty of such a thing. I thought you loved me more."

John opened his mouth to defend himself, but was silenced with a gesture.

"Wait!" ordered his wife. "Don't make bad matters worse with lies and alibis. I want the *truth*, now. If you swore that this Mabel person means nothing to you, I could never believe you now, when those," with a shudder, "were in your pocket with her note! Did you have a good time?" sarcastically.

John could not answer. He was floored. The whole world had dropped from under him. But Dorothy was talking again, this time in a different tone.

"Tell me all about it, John—from start to finish," she implored. "I can forgive you more quickly if you come clean with the whole matter than if I found things out from others. Tell me all about it, and promise that you'll never be untrue again, and maybe I can forgive you."

Morton stood spellbound for a full minute, and then the realization came to him that he was passing through his first lovers' quarrel, and that he had never seen his wife so beautifully vivacious and eager as she waited for his confession. No, he finally decided, as he recalled the talk Winthrop had given him, it would be a crime to let a good quarrel go to waste. Therefore, he must plead guilty and make his story as awful as possible!

Drawing upon his imagination to the breaking point, John related a story of a wild evening at Mabel's apartment.

"—and then," he concluded, "with a final kiss and a passionate embrace, I left her apartment, forgetting that I had put that garment in my pocket.

"Forgive me, Dot, and never, never

will I be so mean again!" Genuine tears had come to his eyes, so fervently had he plead his case, so vividly had he outlined a fictitious experience.

With a little cry of happiness, Dorothy threw herself into his arms, and kissed him with real, burning passion.

"Darling," she murmured, "you are forgiven. I'm sorry you did it, but you will never know how much I love you for telling me all about it. I know now what attraction it was that Mabel offered you that you could not get at home; but, from now on, it will be your little Dot who will give you happiness, and not that horrid Mabel! Kiss me, dearest, and hold me tighter. . . . That's right," she sighed happily.

"I have always had the terrible thought," she continued, "that you haven't been as true as you should have been; but now that you have told me all, I love you for your faults, John, and I know you will never be untrue again."

It was almost dawn before the happy couple became tired of kisses, caresses and words of love and tenderness. It was the happiest night of John's life; and, for Dorothy, it meant the discovery of that part of John for which she had been longing since their first married moment. To them both came the realization of the new and truer love that had come into their lives—a love of unchecked passion and truth—a love free from all constraint!

"Did I leave a lavender note in your coat?" asked Fred the next morning.

"I'll say you did!" replied John happily, "and I wouldn't take a million dollars for your leaving it, Fred."

Vaguely wondering what his partner could have meant, Fred pocketed the note, which John had thrown him across the mahogany desk.

"Aunt Mabel amuses me," he smiled. "The idea of reminding me with this note that the party she gave in my honor was to be at her apartment. Surely, she did not think that I would forget it."

"RHINELANDER 82013"

By Barbara Aldis

"**H**ELEN, for God's sake, get up and come out! I can't have these people suspect that there is anything wrong between us now. It would ruin everything——"

The man's urgent whisper died away. As his fingers pressed the electric button, he found himself staring down at a perfectly strange girl in his wife's bed.

Mary Lee Austin pressed the hall button three times without hearing any answering click. Leaning forward, she read the name plate again: *Mrs. Edgar Frome*,—yes, that was right. Sticking out of the mail box, she saw a piece of paper with her name scrawled upon the edge. Her heart sank. Had she come all this way in the cold and rain only to be told again to "call next week some time"? Her hat was ruined; her cheap little suit was shrinking; her paper-thin shoes let in the wet. And by the time she got back home she would have paid out in bus fares two precious dimes!

Viciously she twirled the folded paper out of the box and opened it.

"Dear Miss Austin:

"I am so sorry not to be able to be here when you call tonight at eight. I expect to return early, however. If you care to wait, you will find a key under the fir tree on the steps. Make yourself at home.

"Yours truly,

"HELEN FROME."

Mary felt herself trembling. She had not realized, until she finished reading it, how very much the note would mean. She knew now that it had represented

the falling of a coin. If it had sent her away, she would never have found the courage to go back to her dreary lodging-house room to begin again the search for work next day. As if in a vision, she saw herself flinging into some warm, bright drug store out of the storm, phoning Rhinelander 82013, and whispering into the receiver the words agreed upon:

"You win."

With a little breath of thankfulness, she stooped and found the key.

It let her into a dimly lighted hall on the third floor. As the soft rugs sank beneath her feet, Mary Lee felt a thrill of envy and pleasure. Entering the spacious living-room, she thought:

"What must it be like to come home to a place like this at night!" Soft lights that blossomed beside every easy chair; flat bowls of flowers; bright-colored magazines; a dying fire that flickered on the bindings of books. Mary Lee's heart lifted happily as she thought:

"Maybe I can!"

Sinking down gratefully upon a deep divan, she drew Mrs. Frome's advertisement from her purse and re-read it for the hundredth time.

"Wanted: a secretary to assist literary woman in her own home. Must be young and presentable, with the background of a lady, as well as an experienced stenographer."

"Surely that's me," thought Mary Lee.

To be one of anxious thousands hunting work in a great city in "hard times"; to watch your small reserve fund growing smaller every day; to start out hope-

fully every morning and come home dead-tired and despairing every night; to tell yourself valiantly that you never hear of anybody's really starving—if you have ever shared this experience, you know the throat-catching terror that had lain in wake for Mary Lee for three weeks now. And if you are, by chance, a pretty girl, you know how easy it becomes to play dangerously with the thought of other things. You have had, tucked away in your mind for the supreme emergency, *your* Rhinelander 82013.

"If I get this job," thought Mary Lee, settling back comfortably on the yielding divan, "I'll forget that number so quick, so quick!"

The pleasant warmth of the room drugged her weary senses; her head fell back. It was the cold that woke her, hours later, when the fire had died to ashes. Her startled eyes sought the mantel clock. Midnight! And no one had come home! Her heart swelled with bitterness against Mrs. Frome. In the dead silence she was conscious that the sound of rain had ceased; running to the window, she saw that the street lamps below were mere blurs of light in whirling, swiftly falling snow.

Slowly Mary Lee turned and started for the door. With her hand on the knob, she paused suddenly, struck with a sensation every woman knows—the sliding tickle a silk stocking gives when a run starts to spread across the tautness of the knee. Mary Lee choked. Here was a catastrophe! She was wearing her only good pair of stockings. If that run reached the edge of her skirt, her last hope of keeping up appearances was gone. It was not a moment in which to stand upon ceremony. The situation called loudly for a needle and thread. Did that door opposite her open into Mrs. Frome's bedroom?

A lovely room, a room all rose-shaded lights and soft rugs and low, cushioned chairs, broke on Mary Lee's eyes as she

pushed open the door, deepening her envious indignation against Mrs. Frome. In a perfectly appointed workbox on a mahogany tabouret, she found thimble, needle and thread. Seated beside the low dressing-table, she crossed her slim legs and began to draw together the edges of the run. A half-open door afforded her tantalizing glimpses of a white-tiled bathroom, a partly empty bottle of pink bath salts on a white shelf, a heap of fluffy towels. . . .

Perhaps a really strong-minded girl could have resisted the temptation that sprang up full-formed in Mary Lee's brain, but Mary Lee was not strong-minded—only very cold and tired and wet, and possessed of a grievance against the owner of all this luxury. And before her lay the bathroom of her dreams! She did not think at all as she walked into it and, turning on a nickel faucet, stood watching a full stream of hot water gush into the porcelain tub. Before her mind's eye rose the picture of the bathroom at Mrs. Vincent's lodging-house—the flickering gas jet that cast weird shadows on the dull, painted walls; the single, sleazy bath towel; the rusty tin tub; the hateful slow trickle of lukewarm water which was all the old iron taps would ever yield.

Mary Lee's clothes lay beside her in a little sodden heap as she picked up the glass bottle and sprinkled a pink mist of the bright, sweet-smelling crystals into the tub. Breathless with pleasure, she stepped into the water's warm embrace. A great, round cake of colored soap that broke into a rich, creamy, fragrant lather against her skin—a clear, cool, rinsing shower. When at last she stood up, wrapped in one of the great, soft bath towels, Mary Lee felt like a new girl. Not in the least like a criminal, but like a braver, nicer Mary Lee, as if the dainty ritual of the bath had restored a waning self-respect.

Her first thought was that she must hurry now and get away. She tidied the

bathroom carefully, and turned to pick up her clothes. Her fingers recoiled from the cold, damp feel of them. It seemed like a profanation to think of drawing these bedraggled objects on over her warm, clean, softly scented skin. Almost as if hypnotized, she stared at the smooth pillows and turned-back sheet above soft blankets on the broad, low, inviting bed. Light, striking through the window pane, showed a heap of snow piled on the window ledge. It was probably the storm, decided Mary Lee, that was keeping Mrs. Frome.

But was there a Mr. Frome?

Still moving as if in a dream, Mary Lee crossed the room and opened a closet door. Her fingers, pushing aside the rich velvets, smart silks, woolens and fragile chiffons, soon satisfied her that no man's clothes hung there. Was there another bedroom, perhaps? A swift little journey of exploration revealed only a maid's room, empty and bare. No neckties or collars in the beautiful old-fashioned chest of drawers—only piles of exquisite lingerie from which Mary Lee at last drew with caressing hands a white *crêpe de chine* nightgown.

"I'll wake up and be gone at daylight," was her last thought as the delicious smoothness of linen sheets received her tired frame.

"Helen, for God's sake get up and come out! I can't have these people suspect there is anything wrong between us now. It would ruin everything——"

The words which woke Mary Lee were followed by a flash of light. Blinking dazedly, she found herself looking up into a strange man's face. It was a good-looking face, clean-featured and young, but stamped at this moment with deep lines of nervous fatigue. Between his brows was a little wrinkle which made Mary Lee, even in her terror, want to reach up and smooth it out with her soft fingertips.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered hastily. "I didn't know Helen had anyone here." There was something touching in the discouraged look to his big shoulders as he turned away. "Where is she, anyway?"

"I don't quite know," improvised Mary Lee hastily, realizing with a rush of relief that he took her for one of his wife's friends. "She—she phoned that she was staying somewhere on account of the storm—I can't remember where. You see, I don't know many of—of Helen's New York friends." As she spoke, Mary Lee was planning rapidly to slip out in the morning and get away before he learned the truth. And then, because he looked so worn and tired that she feared he might be sick, she added shyly:

"Is there anything I can do?"

He laughed at that—a short, hard laugh that in a woman would have been the presage of hysteria. Swinging around suddenly, he studied the face of the girl in the bed—her resolute chin, sweet, sensitive mouth, and candid eyes. Then he reached behind him and closed the door.

"Yes," he said slowly, "there's something you can do. But would you do it, I wonder? Would any woman?" He stared at her doubtfully.

Mary Lee felt a sudden wish to comfort him, sensing the desperate quality in his appeal. She liked the strong, blunt hands with which he clutched the footboard of her bed; she liked the way his blonde hair grew up from the back of his neck, and the look of quivering control in the strong lines of his jaw. She thought of the beautiful clothes, the lovely apartment, and—Helen Frome has *him*, too, was the shamed, envious thought that flashed through her brain.

"I will do anything I can," she answered soberly.

A look of relief swept his face as he dropped into a chair.

"It's a crazy thing to ask," he said eagerly, "but I am at my wits' end.

Would you—would you mind very much coming out and letting me introduce some men to you as my wife? They won't stay long. They have a limousine waiting below. And I can't tell you how important it is to me!

"You see, I am trying to get a job —"

Mary Lee suppressed an impulse to giggle and answer, "So am I."

"— as advertising manager with a big manufacturing firm. I'm with an agency now, and have been handling their account, but it will be a big step up if I can actually get with this other firm. I've been working on it for three months now—working day and night. That's why I cleared out of here. Helen likes gaiety—she always has a gang of people about, so I moved into a hotel where I could work all night, if I wanted to, and not spoil her fun.

"Now the head of this firm is a stickler for propriety, the sanctity of the home—all that sort of thing. He won't hire anyone who isn't what he calls 'settled down in life.' He's got wind of the fact that I'm living at a hotel, and unless I can prove to him that Helen and I are on good terms—well, I don't get the job.

"Tonight I ran into him and his general manager at the University Club. Our talk started out as a friendly visit, but developed into a business conference which lasted till all hours—a big chance for me. Early in the evening something was said about coming up here to meet Mrs. Frome—Helen had told me she meant to be home. The old man jumped at it. Later, of course, he protested that it was too late to come, but I could see him watching me. I knew he was thinking that it's never too late for a good wife to receive her husband's friends. So I insisted—

"And now can I go back out there and tell him *she isn't here?* I've got the job cinched, except for this one thing. You're not from New York, I

understand. You won't ever have to meet him again—"

"But—but—" protested Mary Lee. "Won't Mrs. Fr— won't Helen have to meet him some other time?"

"No. That's all right. Once I've got the job, there's not much chance they will ever meet. He's going to Europe next week, and by the time he gets back, I'll have moved out with Helen to a home in the suburbs—that'll tickle the old man, and I've always wanted one."

"And Helen?" Mary Lee almost murmured. "Does she want one?" But the words did not come. Somehow she knew that the woman whose love for gay parties had driven her husband to work in a hotel was not going to be a contented suburban wife. She remembered Frome's first words: "I can't have these people suspect there is anything wrong between us now." Suspect? That meant, didn't it, that there *was* something wrong? It was wicked, of course, Mary Lee told herself severely, to feel so happy at the thought.

"Why, certainly I'll help you," she said, flashing him a reassuring look. "Don't worry—I think it'll be a lark. Go out now and tell them I'll be right there."

Soft underthings of finest silk, gay little slippers with high heels, a tea gown of black chiffon embroidered in delicate tracteries of palest gold—ruthlessly Mary Lee made her choice from Helen Frome's exquisite wardrobe. Why not? She could not play her part, the part that was to help the other woman's husband to a better job, in her own wet, shrinking suit and shabby shoes. With her hand upon the bedroom door she paused, as women for centuries have paused, for a last, backward, reassuring look.

What she saw chained Mary Lee's feet to the floor in the sudden, rapturous certainty that she was beautiful. Her eyes were blazing with excitement,

her smooth cheeks flushed, her hair still curling from the sweet-scented bathroom steam; through the black chiffon her shoulders gleamed in the lovely slim lines of a Tanagra figurine. Where was the tired, drab girl who had pressed the button in the hall a few hours before? With a happy little laugh Mary Lee crossed the room again, and touched the crystal stopper of a bottle of exotic perfume to her lips and small pink ears.

A tingling thrill ran through her as she heard the gasp of pleasure with which the men rose to meet her in the spacious living-room. She saw Frome's eyes fixed on her almost dazedly as he introduced Richardson, the president, and Gill, his manager. Richardson clapped his eye glasses to his nose, dropped them the length of a black ribbon, and caught them up again. He was a good-looking, very well dressed man, somewhat beyond middle years. In spite of the rather sensual lines of his lips, his pink cheeks and white hair gave him the appearance of a benevolent patriarch. It was easy to imagine him holding decided ideas on the sanctity of the home; whether or not he applied them in his own life, an acute observer might have reflected, might be a very different thing. Gill bowed over Mary Lee's hand, an appreciative flicker in his somewhat impassive eyes.

Half an hour later, as the door closed behind the visitors, Frome turned to Mary Lee, his face alight with triumph, and seized her hands.

"Hot stuff!" he cried softly. "You wonder child!"

To have brought that look of almost boyish relief and excitement to his tired face gave Mary Lee a strange, almost terrifying sensation of happiness. She put one hand to her soft throat.

"You—you think it went over, don't you?" she asked him anxiously.

"Big!" Frome flung himself happily down upon the big divan. A little earlier Mary Lee, rummaging boldly in the

kitchenette, had found for their guests some little cakes and a bottle of wine. Frome now began to munch the fragments hungrily, pushing the plate toward Mary Lee. "Here, have some."

To the lonely girl there was something inexpressibly sweet in this intimate moment here with him alone. She selected her cake, and, tucking her feet under her, curled up in one corner of the divan like a child.

"Funny," reflected Frome comfortably, stretching his feet out toward the re-kindled fire, "what the mere presence of a pretty woman can do!" His glance strayed to her admiringly. "Here it was late—these men were tired; before you came, they scarcely said a word, and then—talk, laughter, gaiety! I never saw Richardson so animated before. There's—there's just no way to thank you sufficiently, my dear."

"Don't try," murmured Mary Lee, very low.

"It's a good joke. I could see Richardson thought I had a wonderful wife." Frome chuckled. "Wait till Helen hears!"

Helen! The word shattered Mary Lee's contented mood. She had forgotten the hour of reckoning that must surely come. She was suddenly aware again that she was very tired.

"It's late," she said lightly, though she had to force the words. To put an end to this happy moment was like deliberately killing some beautiful live thing. "Perhaps, now, you had better go."

Frome was on his feet instantly.

"Of course! I forgot. You must be dead. I'll save my thanks until to-morrow."

"Yes," said Mary Lee, chokingly, "to-morrow," her heart cold with the knowledge that the first pale gleams of to-morrow would find her far away. Funny, how it hurt to think of all the to-morrows when she could never, never hope to see Edgar Frome.

Miserably she waited while she heard him at the hall telephone. He came back in a few minutes with the funny wrinkle back between his brows.

"The devil's own luck," he said. "I can't get a taxicab. There are none running on account of the snow. They say it's inches deep all over the city." He parted the window curtains and stood staring down at the white expanse below. "I guess I can make it on foot to some hotel."

"On foot? In all this storm?" Mary Lee's eyes reflected her dismay as she remembered the tired lines in his face, the nervous tension under which he had been laboring. Why, it might kill him—he might get lost in the snow! Even in the city one heard of such things. The words were torn from her. "Oh, no!"

"Nonsense!" he said lightly, though she saw his eyes were anxious. "I can make it easily."

"Don't be silly!" said Mary Lee crisply, guiltily conscious that she herself had no right beneath this roof. Instinctively she knew that she had nothing to fear from him if he remained. As for her reputation—who cared about her reputation in this big unfriendly town? "If you can make yourself comfortable on that divan, I don't mind in the least if you stay here."

"Oh, I can make myself comfortable," he said, relieved. "I'm used to sleeping there." Was there a shade of bitterness in his tone? Again Mary Lee felt a touch of shame at the eagerness with which her heart received the hint that there was trouble between him and his wife.

"Then I'll bid you good-night," she said. "Happy dreams—of the new job!"

She noticed, as she slipped into bed, that the hands of the little glass boudoir clock pointed to three. Three hours of sleep, she thought, as she sank into a deep abyss of darkness, and then, before he wakes, to steal away—

Bright sunlight woke her, and a knock upon her door. Sitting up in incredulous horror, she saw that the little clock said ten. Whether because of her unusual fatigue or because of the wine, she had overslept four hours.

What was going to happen now?

Mary Lee's brain whirled as she snatched up a rich green *négligé* from the foot of the bed and thrust her feet into a pair of brocaded mules. She felt frightened, but excited, too—almost pleasantly so. Whatever happened, this was better than the stale monotony of waking in her own dreary room. The hour of reckoning would surely come, but in the meantime—she was to see Edgar Frome again!

She opened the door to find him standing in the hall, fully dressed.

"Good morning! I've got breakfast for two on a table before the fire. Won't you come and eat it while the coffee's hot?" His eyes smiled into hers with cheerful *comaraderie*.

"Two seconds," she answered gayly, flinging all thoughts of consequence to the winds. How rested he looked—how pleased! *My doing*, thought Mary Lee.

She was actually singing in the white-tiled bathroom as her young body glowed beneath an icy shower. The mirror showed her that she had lost none of the beauty which care and excitement had given her the night before. As she pulled back the blind, she noticed that outside the window the big flakes of snow were still drifting steadily, slowly down. She hesitated an instant, looking down at her own drab clothes, dry now, but wrinkled and worn. Then, with a little gesture of defiance, she pulled on over her head a simple little frock of flame-colored wool, and ran into the big living-room where Frome was waiting for her before a crackling fire.

To be hungry, to be young, and to be in love—there are few happier fates when the table is spread with honey

and toast and coffee and eggs, and the one you love sits across from you, his fingers occasionally touching yours. If she could only hold time back, thought Mary Lee—if this moment could only last—and last—

"And do you know," Frome was saying, "while you virtually saved my life last night, I don't even know your name."

That sobered her.

"My name is Mary Lee Austin."

He wrinkled his brow in the way she had already grown to love.

"I don't think I've heard Helen speak of you."

"Haven't you?" Mary Lee managed a smile. "That—that's queer." Her elation began to drop away. "I suppose," she said nervously, "she'll be here soon?"

Frome laughed.

"Not she! Look outside—the snow has been falling like this for twelve hours. The whole city's tied up to-day."

"Oh—I!" Mary Lee paled. "Then I can't get away."

"Away?" Frome looked up, startled. "Why do you want to get away? They'll get the streets partly cleared some time to-day. Is it so terrible to be shut up here with me till Helen comes?"

The friendly inquiry in his eyes hurt Mary Lee. She knew that as soon as this interlude was over, she would have nothing left but memories. He would learn the truth from Helen—might it not better come from her? And leave her, at least, the memory of having been honest with the man she loved?

"I—I'm afraid I've got to tell you something," she said in a strangled voice.

Struck by the stark misery in her tone, Frome paused in the act of lighting a cigarette. He saw that her face was pale.

"Tell me, then," he said with quiet kindness. "If there is anything I can do for you, after what you did for me

last night, I shall be only too glad."

With a long breath, Mary Lee plunged into her tale, dreading to see the friendly light in his blue eyes change to disdain. She meant to give only the bare facts, but a stolen glance at Frome's face showed her that he was not looking angry or scornful—only interested. When she paused, a carefully careless question encouraged her to go on. Before she knew it, she had told him everything about her three weeks' desperate search for work, her loneliness, her room at Mrs. Vincents'—even about Rhinelander 82013.

"What was he like, this man?" asked Frome, scowling for the first time. "He ought to have known better than to make such a proposal to you."

"He was my employer," said Mary Lee, adding honestly, "Maybe it was my fault that he thought he—could. You see, it was my first job, and I thought—" she gave Frome a wry little smile—"that all kindly, middle-aged men were respectable. He had a wife and grown-up daughters, you know. So when he first began to pat my shoulder, or take my hand, I thought he—he was being fatherly—" Her voice faltered.

"And then?" prompted Frome.

"Well, then—I had to leave. But he said to me, 'When you get tired of being foolish, my dear, all you've got to do is to call me up and say, "You win".' I wasn't able to help remembering that when things got so bad."

Frome muttered something as he rose and began to pace about the room. It sounded like an oath, but his eyes told Mary Lee that it was not directed at her.

"Of course, we'll find you something to do," he began. "If not with Helen, then with—" He broke off as the shrill whirr of the telephone rang through the room. "That's probably Helen now, saying she won't be home."

Mary Lee heard him at the phone.

"What's that? I don't quite under-

stand. . . Please repeat the message carefully. All right . . . Yes, I get it now. Good-by."

He looked white when he came back into the living-room, and the familiar wrinkle was cut deep between his brows. Mary Lee watched him silently as he began to walk up and down, his hands opening and closing, his blue eyes intent upon some problem of his own.

"Was—was it some bad news?" she ventured softly, when a little time had passed.

He laughed—the same short hard laugh that she had heard the night before.

"Not altogether, perhaps." A few moments' more restless pacing and he paused, looking down at her. "You might as well know it now. That message was from Western Union. My wife has left me." His jaw tightened. "And not alone."

Sympathy for what she thought he must be feeling swept all thought of self from Mary Lee.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she cried.

"Don't be," he returned grimly. "It's a blow—to have it happen this way. But Helen and I didn't get along—haven't for years." He dropped down upon the divan, rubbing his forehead with his hand, and looked at her thoughtfully.

"Do you know," he resumed, "I find I'm glad to be free. Helen should never have married a man like me." Mary Lee liked the scrupulousness with which, even now, he refrained from blaming his wife to her. "I haven't given her the things she wanted—money, good times. She is a very beautiful and brilliant woman, and not to have the things she wanted made her restless, naturally. No wonder," he smiled almost cheerfully, "she couldn't stick to an old plodder like me."

Mary Lee reflected happily that such magnanimity could only be born of indifference, but none the less she felt a

surge of indignation against the wife who had treated this man so badly. She glanced about her at the luxurious room.

"This isn't exactly poverty, you know," she suggested, a touch of dryness in her tones.

"Well, no," admitted Frome. "And, of course, I had every hope of doing better soon—but it didn't begin to be what she wants."

"And you," persisted Mary Lee. "Did she give you what you want?"

The man's face darkened broodingly.

"No," he answered. "Not from the very first. I wanted a wife, of course, but I also wanted children . . . a home. More than anything, I wanted companionship." His glance swung around to her. "Maybe you'll think I am crazy to say it so soon, but I have known since last night that what I really wanted, little Mary Lee, was a girl like you."

The furious beating of her happy heart almost stifled Mary Lee. Frome's hungry eyes, searching her face, told her how terribly in earnest he was. As if from a great distance, she heard her own light tones say:

"It's nice, then, isn't it, to know that—after a few formalities—what you want is yours?"

Frome's kiss crushed the last words on her lips. Time passed. . . . It seemed hours later to Mary Lee when she woke from a happy trance to hear him murmuring, his cheek still pressed against hers:

"It seems mean, darling, after all that you have been through, to ask you to marry a poor man like me."

She drew back her head to look at him.

"And will the advertising manager of Richardson and Company be so poor?"

Frome's hand closed and opened in a little gesture of finality.

"That job's done," he said with tired decisiveness. "Tomorrow's papers, at the latest, will have the news of Helen's impromptu flight. You don't

think Richardson will give me the job after that, I suppose?"

An impish light began to glow in Mary Lee's eyes.

"I know he will," she said positively, twisting a warm little finger into his buttonhole.

Frome smiled down at her with the

tender indulgence which one gives to a child. "And why?"

"And why?"

"Because—" Mary Lee's young laugh rippled out, as she slipped her slender body back into his arms—"because, blind one, he won't dare not to. Richardson is Rhinelander 82013!"



HEARD ON A PARK BENCH

By W. E. Wright

Oh, gee, whatta night, and gosh, whatta moon, and, kid, I love you like 'ell!
Come, sit down side o' me—no, closer than that, for I gotta story to tell;
'Bout when I was a King in old Babby-lone, and you was a peachy slave,
Who lay at my feet, a smile in your eyes, a-watching me rule and rave.

Say, when I was that king in old Babby-lone, a jester would tickle our ribs
With all the new songs from the Follies, and the latest in two-a-day quibs.
And when the six o'clock whistle stopped blowing, and kings of the union would
quit,
I'd leap from my throne to my roadster, and down to the Nile we would flit.

There the slaves and the men and the maidens, all gave you a rousing big hand,
While Cleo stopped still in her vamping, and tore out her hair by the strand.
In a high-powered launch, filled with pillows, you swore you'd be always my own,
Till the royal time-clock called for punching, and I hustled back to my throne.

But I'll can all that Babby-looney chatter, for you ain't nobody's slave.
And if I wanna make a hit with you, sister, I gotta get busy and save.
So I'll toddle along to my food-juggling job, a-slinging of soup and of meat.
A king's all right in his place, sister, but gosh, a girl's gotta eat!



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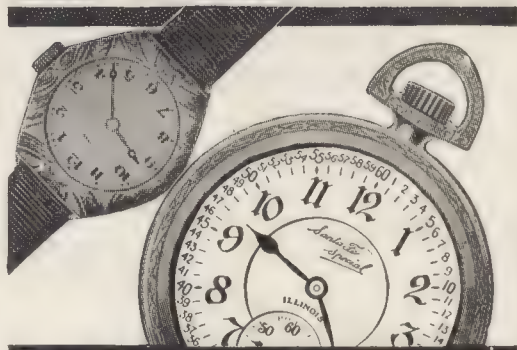
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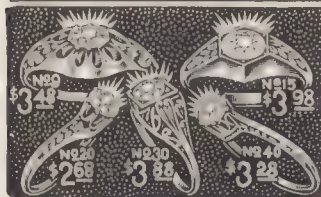
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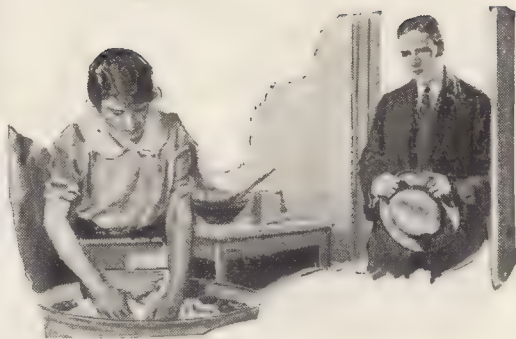


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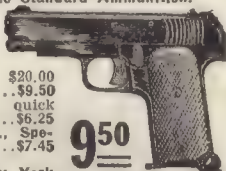
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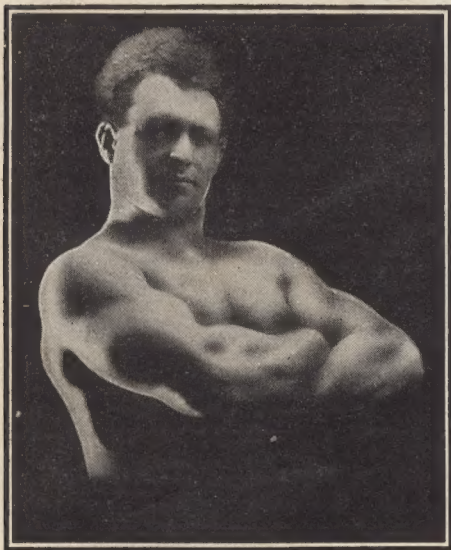
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